

Champions 961

Chapter 961: Someone's Final

The football spun into the goal and rubbed against the net, making a slight rustling sound. But the sound was completely drowned out by the singing of more than 10,000 England fans in the stadium.

Nearly 60,000 Spanish fans in Nou Mestalla stadium, which could hold 70,000 spectators, were now silent collectively. This place had been instantly transformed from Spain's home ground into England's home ground.

"This is a glorious moment in English football! We are now leading the host team, Spain by a score of 2:0 with 15 minutes to go before the end of the game! Which also means that we are only 15 minutes away from England reaching the finals in the international tournament for the first time in 50 years!" John Motson roared excitedly into the microphone, his voice spreading across the whole of England via satellite.

All England fans cheered his words, as if 15 minutes were just a blink of an eye, and they had entered the Bernabéu stadium, the venue for the final first.

The score of 2:0 also disheartened the Spaniards in the stadium. With 15 minutes left in the game and two goals behind, they had to score at least two goals within 15 minutes and also not let England score if they wanted to make it to the finals...It felt extremely difficult just thinking about it. Not to mention that they had to actually make it happen.

Not only the fans, there were also people among the Spanish players on the pitch, who had felt despair when the goal went in...

They were certain that they were outstanding, but they had a feeling of their power being muzzled... as if something went wrong somewhere.

Hierro sat in his seat and bit his lower lip hard till his lips were white. His mind turned quickly, and he wondered what to do if he did not want to give up in such a situation.

After thinking about it for a long time, he determined that they must find a breakthrough point from George Wood's position. Wood was England's captain, core and linchpin. As long as he had a problem, England was likely to collapse at the last minute.

The world of football was definitely not short of that kind of dramatic reversal. His Spanish team also wanted to dedicate it to the fans just this once today!

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Twain's excitement lasted only a short time. Then he began to consider if he was going to bring Wood off at this point. Wood had a yellow card on him. Generally speaking, he should bring him off after taking a two-goal lead just to be safe. But Twain knew that Spain would launch frenzied counterattacks after the game resumed. It would be the most dangerous time at that period. If they were not careful and accidentally allow the other team to score a goal, the situation could be reversed in an instant. Then it would not be England which had the upper hand, but Spain.

Keeping Wood on the field could solidify the defense...

Twain decided to leave Wood on the field for another five minutes after weighing the options. After managing to hold on for five minutes of Spain's most intense offensive, he would not delay for another second and bring Wood off to let him rest. With ten minutes left, they would defend the penalty area to the last so as to hold on to the two-goal advantage. When the time came, as long as God above did not surprise them, they should be able to get through.

As the England players finished celebrating the goal and began to run towards their own half of the field, Twain made a gesture to them on the sidelines to withdraw the defense. At this time, stability triumphed over everything. Basically, there would not be any opportunities for counterattacks...

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After the game resumed, not every Spaniard had given up the fight despite feeling the pain from the score as Twain had expected. As professional athletes, the accumulated experience of meeting with unfavorable situations long-term also helped them at critical times... Most importantly, in front of a crowd of 60,000 in their home ground, they did not want to miss the UEFA European Championship final hosted by their home country.

Hierro stood on the sidelines and stared at the field with a solemn expression, as if he was sending out a message that he would never give up until the final whistle was blown!

In honor of such an opponent, the Royal Navy also raised the flag of Saint George. Wood remained on the field until Twain thought he could bring him off.

On the other hand, Gareth Barry was already warming up on the sidelines. He would replace Wood later – if nothing unexpected happened...

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"We're not really going to make him get a yellow card..." Fàbregas got hold of several of his teammates during a dead ball and urged them in particular, "If he does get a yellow card, the situation will not be good for us. I'm sure he'll be determined to deal with us since he will be out of the next game anyway... So, we're just going to put pressure on them. You don't really have to cause him to get a yellow card... Break through from him and don't fall to the ground with the slightest physical contact. Absolutely do not be like that! Our aim is not to try to position the ball in front of the penalty area, but to penetrate in there!"

Iniesta had already been brought off by Hierro, who brought on Cazorla and changed Lago to play in the middle. Fàbregas was now the only core and commander on the pitch. He must keep a clear head.

"Only ten minutes left, don't give up! Don't ever give up!"

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George Wood found himself the target of a multitude of players once again. He was not afraid of such a challenge, even if it came at the cost of not being able to play in the final game. Because it was his principle – he would not hesitate when things came to a head. As long as the boss kept him on the field,

it meant he was important and there was a task that was not complete yet. He would never back down until he had done his job.

Unfortunately, his teammates would definitely not agree with his thinking.

Fàbregas had already warned his teammates not to focus on revenge against Wood and to find ways to create goals. But Lago had his own ideas – what could be better than letting the opposing captain miss the next game in addition to getting his team into the finals?

Lago's thinking was based on the fact that he had a superb free kick technique and that the Spanish team's place kicks were now handed over to him to execute. Deliberately making Wood foul and causing him to get a yellow card while giving the Spanish team a free kick in front of the goal, was entirely in line with Lago's interests.

But it was not possible to create fouls at random. It had to be done as close as possible to the penalty area. It had to be close to the danger zone, so that the other team's foul would be serious enough for the referee to pull out a card, and such a free kick was more threatening.

When Lago received the ball, he did not pass the football to Fàbregas, who had already pulled out, saw the gap in the England team's defense and put his hand up for the ball. Instead, he chose to dribble on his own to seek a breakthrough. He was rather confident of his own dribbling skills ...

"Idiot!" Fàbregas could not help but scold after he saw his teammate's decision. Looking back, England's rear defensive line had automatically made adjustments and the gap, which was exposed just now, instantly disappeared. He did not know when it would appear the next time.

In this way, he wasted a chance to score, and Fàbregas was certainly furious. But he could not get angry right now. He still had to work with his teammates.

Lago did not know Fàbregas was unhappy with what he had just done. Right now, he only had George Wood in his sights ahead of him. He was going to take that guy down and he was going to save Spain with a free kick!

Wood did not let him do what he wanted. Perhaps because he had too many distracting thoughts in his mind. As he approached Wood, Lago's own pace was in disarray and he did not control the ball. In the face of such dribbling, Wood easily intercepted the ball. Lago stumbled and ran for a few steps before he thought about falling. But he did not achieve what he wanted... No, at least he caught the derision of the England fans.

"The referee should give him a yellow card for such a poor dive!" Motson did not hold back his comments with the Spanish players.

The England team took the opportunity to organize a quick attack that threatened the Spanish goal again. Fortunately, Asenjo was focused this time, played well and caught the shot of Vaughn who was in excellent form.

But it had already upset Fàbregas, who was wearing the captain's armband. He waved at Lago roared in complain that he shouldn't have acted alone just now.

Lago refused to comply and retorted with a remark.

Twain watched the scene happily off the pitch. It looked as if the Spaniards' patience was running out. When a team's players no longer believed that teamwork could open up the situation, but rather hoped to use individual skills to act as a hero, this team was not far from death...

Despite being slightly critical of Lago's performance just now, Fàbregas still passed the ball unselfishly the next time to Lago when he appeared at the right position. Then he ran to position himself, hoping to receive the ball from Lago.

This time Lago let Fàbregas down again and he continued to dribble the ball away toward Wood. His emotional state was not normal. But with two goals behind and time ticking away second by second in the game, it was understandable how abnormal the emotional state could be – everyone would have a moment of hotheadedness and irrationality. It was just that Lago was a little earlier than Fàbregas.

Wood went up to meet it this time. He wanted to make the other side completely give up and let him know that he was an insurmountable mountain, and that the other party was just an ant-like mortal.

Lago had waited for this. This time he must let Wood pay a heavy price!

But the two men did not meet. Within five meters of distance between, Mitchell, who was actively involved in the defense, knocked Lago down from the other side. The referee's whistle unsurprisingly sounded.

Mitchell fell to the ground with Lago, while Wood turned to the referee running over. His eyes were focused on the other man's left arm, which was reaching into the pocket in front of his chest.

If he remembered correctly, Mitchell had already been shown a yellow card in the game against Sweden...

Mitchell apparently did not expect one of his fouls would bring him a yellow card. He had wanted to show off to Wood that he had helped him stop another plot by the enemy, only to see that there was something wrong with Wood's expression. So, he followed Wood's gaze and turned to see the referee holding a yellow card in his hand!

It was not just Wood, and Mitchell had realized the severity of the problem, but Twain was also exactly aware of what the yellow card meant for Mitchell: if England could successfully beat Spain, he would miss the most important game – the final!

"How can this be..." muttered Mitchell. Following which, he suddenly rushed to the referee, angrily trying to protest, but was held back by the quick-eyed George Wood, who dragged him back.

"Do you want to be shown a red card right away?" He shouted to Mitchell, who was struggling so hard.

Instead of quieting down, the man in his grip struggled more violently. "It's not fair!" He roared.

Wood could not continue to comfort Mitchell because if it had been him that fouled just now, then he should have been given the yellow card instead. Because this location was too tricky... it was a little before the penalty arc at the edge of the penalty area. If Lago had broken through him, he would face directly the center backs' defense led by Terry.

Not only Mitchell, but the rest of the England players were unhappy with the referee's decision. They surrounded the referee in the hope that he would withdraw the yellow card decision. But how was that possible? A penalty decision made was like water being splashed out...

Twain did not lash out off the field because he knew the area was tricky for fouls and the referee can give out cards based on his mood. Obviously, at this time the black-clad referee was not in a good mood ...

He just turned around and asked Des Walker how Barry's warmup was. Look at the situation, he could not continue to keep Wood on the field. Mitchell was a good example.

Barry took off his training vest as he ran to Twain's side. He knew he had finally waited for the chance to play.

"You will go on to replace George..." Twain said to him.

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Meanwhile on the pitch, the England players' protest to the referee was already over because it was of no use at all. Only Mitchell looked frustrated. The best chance was right in front of him, but he was going to be a spectator... He was unable to accept the fact, but what could he do?

George Wood saw the fourth official raise the sign for substitution on the sidelines and the man standing next to the fourth official was Gareth Barry. He knew he was about to be replaced. He patted Mitchell in the human wall and opened his mouth to say, "Thank you."

Then he took off the captain's armband and turned around to walk toward Terry, completing the transition of the team captain. Then he walked slowly to the sidelines, enjoying the standing ovation of the England fans.

"Twain has brought off Wood, apparently for the purpose of safeguarding Wood. Unfortunately, Mitchell will be absent from the next game, and that will very likely to be the final..." Motson was glad for Wood while he also lamented for Mitchell. He was also a little worried about England's fate in the final as well. Even though Mitchel did not score many goals, he was definitely a very useful center forward. With his passes, headers and skills, he could even play as the center back on occasions in times of crisis. Such a comprehensive center forward would be able to increase the team's fighting power.

Wood walked to the sidelines and hugged Barry. Then he patted him on the shoulder to send him on the field and shook hands with Twain.

As he shook hands, he asked, "Why didn't you bring Mitchell off?"

Twain shook his head and said, "He has already been given a yellow card. What is the use of replacing him?"

Wood said nothing and turned to walk to the substitutes' bench. Accordingly, the assistant manager, Walker handed over a towel. He flipped it over his head and sat in the chair without a word. He was still feeling sorry for Mitchell's fate...

The Spanish side had begun to prepare to carry out a free kick, which would be personally handled by Lago handled himself. The football drew an arc to bypass the human wall, and even evaded Joe Hart's ten fingers to drill into the goal!

In that moment, nothing could be heard in the Nou Mestalla stadium except the cheers of the Spanish fans. Even Twain himself could not hear the swear words he had uttered.

"We have recovered with one goal! We've recovered with one goal!" The Spanish commentator seemed to see hope.

Fàbregas, who had just been unhappy with Lago, also rushed up to give the other man a powerful hug at this time.

Lago finally enjoyed a hero's treatment...

While the Spaniards were busy celebrating, Mitchell alone picked up the ball in the net and ran all the way to the center circle. Then he smashed the ball hard at the kickoff point. By the time he looked up again, his expression of frustration and anger could no longer be seen.

He rediscovered the value of being a striker.

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"Don't waste your time celebrating!" Hierro was on the sidelines, loudly reminding his players that they were already out of time to do something like this. "Get back to the game quickly! One more goal! With seven minutes left!" He pointed to the watch at his wrist to the Spanish players on the pitch.

Even so, the Spanish players who had returned to their positions could not hide the smiles on their faces. They had already seen hope, and it was only seven minutes from the end of the 90-minute game. But there was still the injury stoppage time...

After the game resumed, Mitchell suddenly stopped actively pull back to defend. Instead, he stayed in front and kept raising his hand for the ball. Apart from Piqué paying more attention to him, the Spanish players paid no mind to him. At this time, their minds were filled with thoughts of scoring a goal to equalize the score and to complete the big reversal ...

In the final period, the Spanish team fully pressed on, and the Spanish fans in the stands kept making their voices heard to support the team like they were hit with injections of adrenaline. The singing of the England fans was completely overpowered.

But when Barry send a long pass over Mitchell's head, the sound came to an abrupt end.

Piqué was too concerned about locking in his position but was bypassed by Mitchell with a turn of his body. He lost his center of gravity and nearly fell to the ground, but he also lost his target.

Mitchell looked back at the Spanish players, who were desperately trying to come back to defend, and then looked up at the football from the corners of his eyes. He was already outside the top of the penalty arc.

"How can you forget the defense?" The Spanish commentator asked angrily. But was it not too late to think about this question now?

Asenjo must also be eager to ask his teammates this question, but now it was better to block the other side's one-on-one face-off first...

"Asenjo abandons the goal to strike. This is a one-on-one face-off with the goalkeeper! It's a great opportunity for Mitchell. If he can score the goal, we'll definitely go to the final!"

Seeing this scene, George Wood pulled off the white towel over his head and stood up from the substitutes' bench, staring nervously at the Spanish team's penalty area.

Not every one-on-one face-off with the goalkeeper would result in a goal. While the goalkeeper was under pressure, the lone striker also had to shoulder great pressure, which could very well be more than the goalkeeper ...

"Put it in, Aaron!" Twain, on the sidelines, gritted his teeth and roared. His fists were clenched tightly till the knuckles turned white. "This is your final! Put it in!"

Facing Asenjo, who had already struck at the spot near the penalty spot, Mitchell suddenly stopped and raised his right leg. The football just landed at the same time, as if everything had been calculated with precision. He did not shoot hard. He just lifted the top of his right foot... And the football leaped again and flew over Asenjo's head, drawing a parabolic line and crashing straight into the goal.

Since I can't go to the final, I'll just put the ball into the goal that is set aside for the final ahead of time!

Using my right foot to send the team to the final! There's nothing more to regret! That's right, there's nothing more...

The football brushed against the crossbar to fly over the goal line and ended up inside the goal.

Son of a bitch! Why is it me...

Mitchell was on his knees and fell to the ground.

The Nou Mestalla stadium was silent.

"It's one of the most beautiful arcs I've ever seen..." In such a quiet environment, John Motson sighed gently.

Chapter 962: For Mitchell

The England fans had been feeling on edge earlier, but Mitchell's goal delighted them immensely and blew all their worries away. They began hugging one another and cheering at the top of their voices at the stands. Even the fans watching the live coverage of the match in England were all shouting Mitchell's name as well.

Everyone at the England dugout jumped to their feet after seeing Mitchell score the goal. They then ran to the side of the pitch and waved their fists in the air wildly to celebrate the goal.

It was a joyous moment for the British. Their team led Spain 3:1 right before the match went into stoppage time. England was definitely guaranteed of qualification into the finals now. The fans went

wild with their celebrations. If there was beer in their hands, they would gulp it all down, and if there were people next to them, they would give them a hug.

The atmosphere at the stadium was merry and uproarious. The England players and fans were all busy celebrating, but Mitchell was the only one who did not join in the celebrations. He knelt on the pitch alone.

The joy of qualifying for the finals had nothing to do with him. His journey in the Euro Cup will come to an end the moment the referee blows on his whistle to signal the end of this semi-final match.

He just could not bring himself to smile at a time like this, even though he has always been an optimistic person.

Rooney ran up to Mitchell and wrapped an arm around the latter's shoulder as he knelt down next to him. "Well done, Aaron!"

Mitchell did not respond to his senior's praise.

He wished that the match would last a little longer. He did not want to have to leave the pitch so quickly.

"Aaron Mitchell. He might not be playing in the finals, but he has sent his team into the finals with a beautiful goal... It's really a shame that we won't get to see him play at the Bernabéu during the finals."

"England has lost a pointed fang. I don't know how this loss would affect them during the finals..." After seeing Mitchell's goal, the commentators working for other countries all began expressing how Mitchell's absence from the finals would give Twain a bad headache. Twain would definitely have a harder time setting up his team for the finals without Mitchell in the team.

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Asenjo threw out his hands before him and shook his head in frustration. There was nothing he could say about Mitchell's goal. He had expected England to go on the counter-attack, but he did not expect Mitchell to choose to shoot for goal in that manner. There was really nothing he could do to stop the goal.

Piqué stood before him. His head was lowered, and no one could see the expression on his face. No one knew what was on his mind at this very moment.

Fàbregas pursed his lips and hugged his head with his hands. He could see the fate that awaits his team for this match. They were going to lose. Where exactly did it go wrong for his team? Why is the strong Spain team so helpless against England?

Hierro probably knows the answer to Fàbregas' question. England's change in formation for the match had gone against his expectations, and he failed to prepare his team for it in advance. In addition, he was also too slow in making the necessary adjustments to deal with England's new formation. He failed to make any tweaks in the first half and simply sat back and watched as the momentum of the match shifted in England's favor.

It pains Hierro to admit it, but he is still inexperienced as a manager... He should have made adjustments at halftime. He allowed himself to fall into Twain's trap and be led around by the nose.

Twain did not win in a battle of tactics. He won in a battle of experience.

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The stoppage time lasted for four minutes. The Spain team knew that their hopes of qualifying for the finals were bleak, but they were not willing to throw in the towel just yet. They did not wish to let England win over them this easily. Thus, they attacked England's penalty box ferociously within those four minutes. The entire England team retreated backwards and solidified their defense to deal with Spain's flurry of attacks.

When the final whistle blew, all the Spain players collapsed to the ground, whereas the England substitutes ran onto the pitch to hug their teammates and they celebrated the historic moment together.

"The match is over! The final score is 3:1! England has defeated Spain! We have made our way into the finals of a major international competition once again after 50 years! We are going to become the champions!" John Motson yelled loudly, but his voice got drowned out by the cheers in the stadium.

The first thing that Twain did was to run towards Mitchell and give him a tight hug.

"You did well, Aaron."

He stroked Mitchell's hair and tried to console the dispirited player.

Mitchell could not hold his tears back. He allowed his tears to fall on Twain's tuxedo and shirt. "I want to play in the finals, boss..."

Twain did not know what to say to Mitchell. All he could do was to tighten his embrace.

George Wood had intended to go over to Mitchell to comfort him, but he was a little too slow in his actions. He was dragged away by his passionate teammates before he could even make his way over to Mitchell. He was about to leave with his teammates when he saw Twain walk over to Mitchell. He stopped in his tracks and quietly watched as Twain gave Mitchell a hug and said a few words to him from afar.

There might be a million people who are happy right now, but sadly, no one would be able to make the youngster happy.

Wood felt someone pat him on the arm. He turned around and realized that Fàbregas was standing behind him. Fàbregas pointed at Wood's jersey and asked, "Do you want to exchange it?"

Wood did not hesitate. He took off his jersey and handed it to him immediately.

Similarly, Fàbregas handed his own jersey to Wood as well.

"You guys played well. As for Mitchell... I'm sorry. It wasn't my decision..." Fàbregas tried to comfort the despondent Wood.

Wood shook his head. "If it were me, I'd have done the same."

"If it were you? You mean you would have committed the foul? Or do you mean you would have enticed the other player to commit the foul?"

“Both.” Wood placed Fàbregas’ jersey on his shoulder.

Fàbregas knew that Wood meant what he said, and he smiled in response. He felt like he was a fool for asking Wood that. How could he possibly forget what kind of player Wood is? ‘Do whatever it takes to achieve your goal’. That is what their boss, Tony Twain, had inculcated in them. Also, he seems to be forgetting something else as well: the winner does not need the loser to sympathize with him.

“I wish you and your team all the best. The finals would definitely be tough, but I’d be rooting for you.” Fàbregas patted Wood on the shoulder. The two have played against each other for close to 10 years in the Premier League, and they have also been friends for several years as well. “Your team eliminated us. I’d definitely hope that you go on to become champions, if not it’d be embarrassing for us.”

Fàbregas waved his hands and bade farewell to the winner, Wood.

Twain specially talked about Mitchell during the post-match press conference. He commended Mitchell’s performance in the match and admitted that it was a big blow to the team to lose such a talented center-forward in the finals.

A reporter brought up how Lago’s real target had been Wood instead of Mitchell. He then asked Twain who he would drop from the team between Wood and Mitchell, to which Twain replied, “I would not drop either of them.”

The England players were not as happy as they should be to qualify for the finals due to the fact that Mitchell was not going to play in the match. They all tried to console Mitchell in the locker room, but none of their consolations could beat a hug from Wood.

Wood knew in his heart that it was Mitchell who had given him the opportunity to play in the finals, and that is why he put even more force into his embrace.

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Mitchell was inherently optimistic, and he was already back to his normal self the next morning. The team had their breakfast at the hotel before setting off for Madrid, and they noticed then that there was not even a hint of depression on his face any longer. Not only that, he also sounded much happier when his teammates spoke to him.

The team’s assistant manager, Des Walker, heaved a sigh of relief at the sight. If Mitchell had continued to pull a long face, it would have affected the team’s morale and mentality, and this would not be beneficial to their performance in the finals. However, based on how things are now, it looks like he had worried for nothing.

The players did not get a chance to relax. They had to attend a night training session that Twain had arranged for them when they arrived in Madrid. There was no need for Mitchell to participate in the training session since his journey in the Euro Cup has ended, but for some reason, he attended the session and was also very serious during it. The other players had no excuse to be lazy after seeing Mitchell’s attitude towards the training session.

The reason for Mitchell’s behaviour is not to spur his teammates on. He just wanted to vent his frustrations for not being able to play in the finals, and the training session was the only outlet that he had.

The England players noticed Mitchell's behavior during the training session, and they began planning something behind his back.

"We need to do something for him." A few of the team's forwards were whispering amongst themselves in a corner away from Mitchell. "He has become a part of the audience in such an important match. I know he definitely feels terrible over it. Don't be fooled by how happy he looks right now. It's all an act." Agbonlahor really felt for Mitchell given how they are also teammates in Nottingham Forest.

"We've consoled him numerous times, but it doesn't look like our consolations helped him at all..." James Vaughan felt helpless and did not know what else he could do for Mitchell. He did not know Mitchell very well, and he has only interacted with Mitchell when they play together in the England national team. As a result, he was not able to say the words that a close friend would to Mitchell.

"Now's not the time to be comforting him." Rooney voiced his opinion. "We can say whatever we want, but we'd never be able to comfort him. We can't change the fact that he's still not going to play in the game. I think what we should do now is to let him feel like he's a part of us." Rooney thought about it for a moment before lifting his head to look at the other two players. "I don't know which one of us is going to start in the finals."

Rooney is definitely not trying to be humble when he said those words. He is not that kind of person. However, he is unable to say for sure who will start in the finals due to the fact that Twain has constantly been making adjustments to the team ever since the group stage match against Portugal. Anyone can start in matches and anyone can sit on the bench. It would be foolish to say that a particular player would definitely start in a match before the team list is officially announced.

"I don't know who among us would be able to score a goal either. But, I think we could run over and hug him after we scored, or we could write something on our T-shirts too."

"This is a great idea!" Agbonlahor's eyes lit up. "I'd go and tell the rest..." He stood to his feet and was about to leave when he was stopped by Rooney.

"Make sure Mitchell doesn't hear of this. Let's give him a surprise!"

Agbonlahor did an 'OK' sign to Rooney.

Most people would have noticed Agbonlahor whispering to the other players by now because it was that obvious and eye-grabbing, but Mitchell was so engrossed in venting his frustrations that he did not pay attention to his teammates' abnormal behavior.

Mitchell rarely puts a lot of strength behind his shots when he shoots for goal, but all the shots that he has made during training so far have all been strong and powerful. It was as though the goalkeeper, Joe Hart, was his nemesis.

Mitchell might not have realized that he was putting a lot of strength behind his shots, but it did not mean that others did not notice it just like him.

"What are they doing?" The assistant manager, Des Walker, furrowed his eyebrows when he saw a group of players looking around and acting suspiciously.

“God knows.” Twain shrugged. He did not particularly care about what the players were up to. Everyone is entitled to privacy, and the players are no exception. The managers have no need to intervene if the players are just crowding around to talk about topics that they are all interested in. “As long as they don’t do that during training.”

At the moment, Twain’s mind was imbued with thoughts of their upcoming opponent. He did not care about what his players were up to.

Their opponents in the finals had been decided.

It was Italy, the team that Twain was most worried about.

Italy’s manager was a born tactical master, and the finals match is bound to be a tactical showdown between the two sides. Additionally, Italy has always been a defensive team. They would definitely not give England the space that they need to make use of their pace. England would definitely find it hard to rely on their quick counter-attacks to score goals during the match. Twain expects the match to be a very grueling one for England.

Twain has a lot on his plate right now. Why would he possibly care about a trifle like what the players are discussing amongst themselves?

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Twain was not the only one who was worried about his opponent in the finals. Italy’s manager, Marcello Lippi, was just as worried as he was.

The 68-year-old Lippi plans to retire after the Euro Cup is over, and he does not intend to be the manager of the Italy national team ever again in the future. In truth, this was his second time coming out of retirement to rescue the Italy team. He had retired back in 2006 after leading the Italy team to become champions of the World Cup that was held in Germany, but his successor, Marco Donadel, performed terribly during the 2008 Euro Cup, and the Italian Football Federation came knocking on his door and gave him the reins to the team once again. Lippi continued to be in charge of the Italy team until the 2012 Euro Cup. The team performed poorly in that year’s competition and Lippi resigned afterwards, but things did not improve for the Italy team. Lippi’s successor performed even worse than he did. He did not even manage to lead the team past the group stages at the World Cup that was held in Brazil. Think about it! They are Italy, a powerhouse team! How can they not even progress past the group stages? Many Italy fans wanted Lippi back in charge after seeing the poor results. Some of the more passionate fans even made their way down to his house and carried out a sit-in before his front door. Their gesture touched Lippi, and he decided to take charge of the Italy national team once again. However, he only promised to take charge until the end of the Euro Cup. Once the Euro Cup is over, he would retire once and for all, and he hopes that the fans would not disturb him again.

Lippi probably never expected that he would be able to lead the Italy team all the way into the finals on his last time in charge. The Italian press are all talking about how Lippi intends to end his managerial career with a Euro Cup trophy. When Lippi was the manager of Juventus, he led his team to five Serie A titles, one Coppa Italia trophy, one Intercontinental Cup trophy and one Champions League trophy. He reached the peak of his managerial career in 2006, when he led the Italy team that no one thought highly of to become champions of the World Cup that was held in Germany in 2006. The only regret that

such an accomplished manager like him has is that he has yet to win the Euro Cup with the Italy national team thus far.

He had not intended to take charge of the Italy national team for the third time of his career, but it looks like this unintentional act of his was going to help him fulfill the biggest dream of his life. He hopes that he would be able to retire from the sport without any regrets, and he wants to leave behind a legacy in world football by retiring from the job that he deeply loves with a lot of accolades under his name.

However, he has to defeat a tough opponent before he can become a legend of the sport. His opponent is just like a comet that has suddenly appeared on the footballing scene. He shines very bright and has achieved nearly as many titles and trophies as Lippi did. He is regarded as the most dominant manager of the decade, and his name is Tony Twain.

This is going to be a clash between two men named as the 'Godfather of Football'. The old 'godfather' would face off with the new 'godfather', and it also signified the transition from the 'old' generation to the 'new' generation for European football.

It does not matter which side goes on to become champions in the finals. Both England and Italy are strong teams, and the teams that lost to either team would definitely take comfort in the fact that the team that they lost to was truly a strong team. At the very least, they did not lose to a weak team. It is not embarrassing to have lost against a team that made its way to the finals...

Chapter 963: Italy Will Also Do the Same

Lippi, the manager of the Italian national team, gave a television interview before leading the team to the UEFA European Championship. In the interview, the elegant "silver fox", with a cigar from the "paradise" Tuscany clamped in his mouth, spoke frankly with assurance as he said goodbye to the television audience across Italy—

"This is my last time in charge of the national team. After the end of European Championship, I will leave no matter what happens in the end. Of course, I want to win the championship. Italy is a team with the ability to win the championship. I can't say too much before anything happens..."

In fact, the people within Italy did not place too much hope for this team. They believed that the host team, Spain and the French team, undefeated in the qualifiers were more likely than Italy to win the title. If Italy had encountered these teams before the final, it would have been hard to say what the outcome would be.

The Italians' pessimism stemmed from the World Cup in Brazil two years ago. In that tournament, Italy, considered the favorite to win the title before the tournament, was eliminated during the group stage and had to return home. The Italian team was not a "group of death". It was considered a major upset at the time.

The World Cup defeat of that time caused many people to leave the national team, including the 35 years old Pirlo, the 32 years old Cassano, the 32 years old Dossena, and the 36 years old Buffon. The current national team had been re-established and they had nothing to do with the Italian team that won the World Cup in Germany a decade ago.

But Italian football was so strange that every time the world looked down on them, they could always achieve impressive results. For example, they were the champions in the 1982 World Cup and 2006 World Cup.

Now they had also made it all the way to the final, hoping to win the European Championship. As a four-time World Cup champion team, they had only won once in the highest level of competition on the continent, which was really not in line with their status as the world's powerful team. The Italians wanted to put their name on the UEFA European Championship for the second time. Although people were generally not optimistic about them before the game, they still made it to the final. Then, at this time, the voices in Italy were naturally unanimous in believing that the blue warriors led by Lippi could beat England and ascend back to the top of Europe.

In order to cheer the team on and boost themselves up, the Italian media took out the game that happened six years ago as an example. In the World Cup in South Africa six years ago, the England team, led by Capello, played well and made it to the semifinals only to encounter Lippi's Italian team. Lippi had the last laugh in the showdown between the two Italian managers. The Italian media now rehashed this matter to say, "Look, we have a psychological advantage over England."

Such a statement was far-fetched, but today's Italians just liked to listen to it.

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An atmosphere of optimism was deliberately created within Italy. But Lippi did not think that there was much to be optimistic about the game. As a manager who had experience a lot of games, he had encountered all kinds of opponents and led teams to play countless games without repeat. He had a wealth of experience and he was aware that this England team was very difficult to deal with.

Although at the start of the UEFA European Championship, Twain's team gave a bad impression to people and at one point even came close to not being able to advance out of the group stage. But since the start of the game against Germany, their performance had been getting better and better. They defeated Germany by 2:1, ended Sweden's undefeated 48-year run against them with a 2:0 score, crushed the hot favorite, French team 4:0, and eliminated the host team, Spain with 3:1. Such results were impressive enough. One must know that they basically eliminated the best teams in Europe on their way to the title. Italy, on the other hand, had a much easier path to being promoted.

The good news now was that England fought fiercely with all the top teams all the way and so their physical exertion must have been greater than Italy's and the England players must be mentally exhausted. Even though Italy had one less day of rest than England, they played so easily in the semifinals that it could be described as "an effortless victory."

Lippi's tactics were simple, and not hard to guess. He would emphasize on the defense before he underscored the offense. No matter what happened, the defense was the most important. The England team showed its strong attacking prowess in the UEFA European Championship. The only exception being that they did not score a goal in the game against Wales. It was this game that Lippi needed to focus his research on. Those games in which the teams had lost to England were of little value. Only Wales' victory over England was worth studying. From there he could find the code to beat England.

Lippi had already thoroughly studied the game. Wales clung fast to defense and counterattack. They deliberately employed a weak approach, and then waited for England to be arrogant and underestimate the opponent. After which, they made use of their ability with place kicks to determine victory with a goal. The tactics were simple, but they worked very effectively. The Wales manager, Toshack seized on the characteristic that England was in high spirits and proud from its recent victory over Portugal to develop the set of tactics, which ultimately paid off. Their only victory at this UEFA European Championship put them in the top 16.

Wales did not continue to use the defend to the last tactics in the game against Italy. Perhaps because they had already achieved their pre-match target, so they let their guard down in the game. Perhaps Toshack wanted to show the other side of the team, so they attacked aggressively the moment the game started and wanted to breach the Italian goal. Unfortunately, they were met with a piece of iron – even when they were up against a weak team like Wales, Lippi insisted on playing defensive counterattack. The copper-walled like defense made Wales' offensive go home with its tail between its legs and exposed holes in their rear defensive line, in which Italy seized hold of these gaps to counterattack and defeated Wales with ease.

Now, come to think of it, Lippi might have wanted Wales to employ the same tactics as they had used against England in the game, so that he had a chance to test how much the team could accomplish in the face of such diehard defense tactic.

He was currently uncertain as to what tactics Twain would use against Italy.

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“Lippi will definitely persist with the defensive counterattack tactic.” Twain said in a meeting with the coaching staff. “He has led the team to play a lot of games. Whenever he wanted to hold a massive offensive campaign, it always end badly. Personally, I think there’s a game that is a good reference for us. It is not known how many people still remember the game – it was a group stage game during the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup when Brazil crushed Italy by 3:0.”

Once he said so, several knowledgeable coaches immediately showed a dawning look of realization. Everyone still remembered the game.

“Lippi had already deployed the strongest lineup he could have sent for that game. He wanted to attack Brazil because he needed to score goals and a victory to advance from the group stage. The 4-3-3 was Italy’s formation at the time, with Pirlo and Montolivo as the double cores. There was also De Rossi. But the performance from such a lineup was a tragic sight. Because Pirlo was old and Montolivo lacked speed and was not good at defending. While only De Rossi was in the midfield to deal with Brazil’s Kaka, Robinho, Maicon, Melo and the others. Not only did Italy lose the game in terms of the score, but it could not gain the upper hand at all on the pitch. The game caused a lot of shock to Lippi and left him completely disillusioned. From then on he went back to the old way of defensive counterattack...” Twain spoke with confidence, as if the game had not happened seven years ago, but only yesterday.

“In this final, we can’t expect Lippi to make the same mistakes as he did then. I think Lippi will continue to stick to the defensive counterattack tactics. They have players in the front field who can solve problems on their own. As long as they can hold on to the tie, they are likely to win. We have two options: first, try to score goals as quickly as possible in the game and force Italy to press out and

contend with us, so that we have more chances.” He put up two fingers and continued, “Second, we also retract to mainly play defense and avoid conceding the goal first. Then we drag the game till the penalty shootout and bet on our luck.”

“Which one do you choose?” He asked.

The coaches were in deep thought one by one.

Generally speaking, the finals in international tournaments were usually boring, because most people chose to play conservatively and making sure that their side did not concede the goal before they would consider scoring a goal. If both teams’ manager thought so, then the final game must be boring without exception.

The oldest manager, the 66-year-old Tony Carr, was the first to express his opinion. He said, “I think it’s better to be more cautious, Tony. Defense should come first, and we have to make sure it’s not us who concede the goal first before we can consider beating Italy. In a final like this, the side that concedes the goal first will become reactive, especially when we’re up against a team that’s widely known for its solid defense...”

Twain did not respond. He did not nod in agreement or shake his head to reject. He just looked at the others, hoping to hear more of their opinions.

“I don’t agree with you, old Carr.” Steve Wigley disagreed, “I think we should be more active. Lippi definitely won’t think we’d take the initiative to be aggressive in the finals. He’d think we would be like what you thought, and I think that’s exactly what we can take advantage of. Take the initiative to attack and fight to score goals first. We have the strength to do so.” He even clenched his fist.

When he heard someone object to his suggestion, Carr did not immediately retort. He just smiled and shook his head.

“I think it’s better to be conservative. It’s the final. We can’t afford to make mistakes, at least we can’t make mistakes first...” Another coach, Steve Gattling spoke, “The final game is not about which team is better than which, but which team makes less mistakes. Even if we have to drag it till the penalty shootout, we have a chance to win. We just need to strengthen our penalty shootout training these days.”

The votes were now two to one, with the conservative coaches temporarily gaining the upper hand.

Twain turned his attention to Des Walker. As an assistant manager, he also had to add his two cents’ worth.

“I’m in favor of Wigley’s suggestion.” Walker’s opinion was simple.

Now everyone looked at Twain again. The votes were two for two for the conservative and offensive coaches. It was a tie.

Twain did not give an immediate answer. Apparently, he was still mulling it over. The conservative coaches had their reasons, and it was persuasive. Such finals were won by teams that made fewer or no mistakes at all. Conservative defense was the way to go if they did not want to make mistakes.

According to reason, Twain was the kind of person who would do whatever it took to win and was not afraid to sacrifice the play. He was also not afraid to take on the blackened name of playing passive football. As long as he could lift the championship trophy, he could trample on all those people who had once scolded him in the mud.

But today, Twain did not really want to do that. Or rather, he did not intend to do so.

“Every one of you spoke with a lot of reason, which makes it really difficult for me...” He deliberately gave a look of being in a tight spot.

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George Wood, who had just showered, received a call from Gareth Bale.

“Guess where I am! George!” As soon as he got on the phone, he heard Bale’s energetic voice.

“At home.” Wood did not bother to play this childish game with Bale, so he just named a place.

“Tsk, you’re so boring! I’m in the Maldives! Palm trees and white sandy beaches, ten million times better than the British weather! I love it here! It’s good to be knocked out early...” Bale said in exaggeration.

Mitchell pushed open the door to enter and saw Wood on the phone, so he casually asked, “Is that your mother?”

Wood shook his head and said, “Just a noisy little monkey.”

Mitchell laughed for he knew who had called.

“Hey, George!” Bale heard Wood’s words and was not happy. He said, “I was kind enough to call you. How can you treat me like this?”

“What’s the matter?” Wood ignored his antics and asked directly.

“Congratulations on getting to the final.” Bale said sourly. Although he had said earlier that it was nice to be eliminated early, in fact he would rather stay in Spain at this time.

“Thank you.”

“I heard that your opponent is Italy, and I have something to tell you. Maybe it might be of some help to you.”

Wood raised his eyebrows in response, “Oh?”

“What do you mean by ‘oh’!” Bale knew Wood was interested. He had finally gotten a handle on Wood.

All right, thank you. Please tell me.”

Bale cleared his throat and fully enjoyed the respect Wood gave him before continuing, “If you can say to the boss, tell him it’s best to take a more conservative defensive counterattack approach against Italy...”

“Italy will do the same as well.”

“I know! But this is the final, not a game in the group stage. There is no such thing as a draw. Even if everyone defends, the outcome will still be determined! A penalty shootout! I think that’s the best way to decide where the championship trophy should belong to. When we played against Italy, being in the top 16 teams had gone to our heads a little. Everyone from the coaches to ourselves, thought we could challenge Italy. So, we tried to take the initiative to attack. And as a result? We were utterly defeated. Lippi was cunning. He waited for someone else to attack him, and then he waited for the opportunity to fight back. He’s really similar to the boss on this. So, I suggest that the boss does the same. It doesn’t matter if the game is awful to watch and never mind if the game is boring. You’re not playing for the television audience. This method gives you a very high chance of winning the title. I believe England’s defense is not a problem with you there. To be honest, if we had continued to use the tactics that were used against you in that game, maybe we could have dragged them into overtime or even a penalty shootout. It’s just a pity...”

Bale was silent for a moment. Obviously he was still brooding over being knocked out and eliminated from the competition.

“If we had defeated Italy, maybe it would have been us you meet in the final! At that time, we could have a psychological advantage dealing with you! Ha ha!” For a moment, his voice was full of energy again.

Soon after, Bale told Wood about the players in the Italian team who needed special attention and reminded him to be extra careful of those players in the game. All of these were first-hand information Bale had acquired after the match against Italy. He certainly knew that the boss was used to thoroughly studying his opponents, but the information collected from the player’s point of view should have something new. Even if it was only a little bit, he wanted to help the boss.

Finally, he was about to hang up after he bragged about the Maldives scenery and weather.

“George.” He suddenly called out again.

“Yes?” Wood, who was going to put down his phone, stopped.

“You must win! Be sure to win the championship title!”

“Of course. We’re not here to compete for the first runner-up spot.”

“He he, that’s good, that’s good...” Bale snickered and said, “Then I can say at that time –’Look, we’re the only team that the European Championship winner had not defeated!”

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It was raining heavily outside the windows and the winds were raging in the distance sea. The huge waves rolled up and hit the dam on the shores. The poor palm trees were bowed down in the ugly weather, seemingly in danger of breaking their trunks at any time. The shore was covered with white mist of water, and nothing could be seen in the distance.

The loud roar could not be stopped even with the closed windows and steadily drilled into the dim room.

The Maldives rarely had such weather, but it did not mean it would never have it. May to November in the Maldives was the rainy season. The heavy rainfall brought on by the southwest monsoon seemed to confront the dry weather brought by the northeast monsoon. It was often blustery with rapid waves and strong gales. At this time, the tourist could only hide in the hotel room and sigh in despair.

The hapless Gareth Bale dropped his phone and laid in bed, bore stiff looking at the ceiling. He had the time to call Wood since his girlfriend was taking a bath.

“Damn it! It’s not easy to come to the Maldives, but yet we encounter this kind of f**king weather ... Ah, it’s still better to be in Spain...”

Chapter 964: The Encounter

Shaun Barclay’s arrival surprised Twain a little. Because in the entirety of the period during the European Cup, this England Football Association’s main character had never come to spectate his team, he only offered some help during the checkup of Wood, during other times, it was as if he disappeared.

Barclays did not come into contact with the players, but instead directly went straight to Twain. That point satisfied Twain, at the very least, England’s managers were not like the Chinese Association’s managers, skipping the head coach and directly implicating themselves into the team matters. Up till now, in the English team, he felt like he got the respect he deserved.

Barclays and Twain were meeting by themselves for the first time in the coffee shop at the basement of the hotel. Barclays was most concerned about what results England could achieve this time. The Football Association’s minimum target for Twain was a top four finish, but since Twain had already accomplished his task exceeding their expectations. Following logic, the Football Association’s CEO should be relaxed. But humans are always greedy, since we are already in the finals, why not fight for the championship?

Everyone had this exact same idea so of course the Football Association’s CEO would have it as well.

Although Twain had already expressed his ambition for obtaining the championships, he might need to act a little humble when face to face with the CEO of the Football Association.

“I can’t promise anything.” Twain spread his hands, “The competition has not even started, and also our opponents are very strong.”

Barclays was scolding Twain on the inside for being cunning but on the surface, he smiled at him and said, “This is not the Tony Twain that I know, who was the one who proclaimed his team was the one who would win the championships?”

Twain knew Barclays was pressing himself, but his face did not have any change in expressions, he only slightly nodded. “The season is too long, we have enough time to carry out adjustments. But there is only a match in the finals, whether it is 90 minutes or 120 minutes long, the room to allow errors is too small. I don’t want you to be overly disappointed after having high expectations, Mr Barclays,” He rebutted without hesitation.

Barclays continued scolding him inside. He came out this time to hear out what Twain's true aim was. In the end, Twain's lips were sealed, not saying anything.

"But I don't think anyone's target is obtaining the runner-up, right?" He asked.

This time, Twain nodded definitely. "That is for sure, we would work hard to fight for the championships."

That line was Barclay's only gain. To his slight displeasure, Twain remained as unruly as he was rumoured to be and cold-hearted towards the chairman of the Football Association. Towards the end of the meeting he even felt impatient, as if he had a lot of matters at hand, while Barclays himself had an abundance of time.

After leaving the hotel, Barclays was blocked by reporters for a brief interview.

"Our goal is to be champions." In front of the media, he announced the ultimate goal of the team on behalf of Twain.

In contrast to Barclays's high profile, Twain was surprisingly keeping a low profile before finals.

In the past, when the team Twain was coaching in an important match, he would never forget starting a vocal war with the opposing head coach, a psychological warfare. But this time, he did not do this at all.

He did not take the initiative to attack Italy, nor did he provoke Lippi. Other than the regular trainings, he would not mention any other extra things. It was as if he wanted to leave his first encounter with Lippi till the press conference on the day before the match.

However, the more Twain was acting low profile, the more worried the Italians were. Considering Italy's fate, if Twain was acting like a grandson before the game, he would become the sole godfather after the match.

The Italians were worried what Twain was plotting behind his low profile against them. In these few days, the Italian media was trying every method to find out the training conditions of the English team, trying to figure out what the English people was plotting.

In reality, they really had wronged Twain...

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Wood passed on the information Bale told him during the training break onto Twain. This information was helpful for Twain in implementing the tactics, especially for defensive tactics, it was a lot more tailored for the team.

The overall tactics of the game have long been determined. All of the trainings today were carried out based on that one tactic. No matter how different the opinions were in the coaching crew, all of them would have to put down their own opinions once the head coach was decided and work together with all their effort.

The good news spread quickly. With Ben Trey and Walcott both recovering from injury, they would be able to go onto the roster during the finals. Other than Mitchell which was suspended due to the

accumulation of too many yellow cards, England was able to send their strongest roster to welcome Italy.

George Wood's right foot was no longer a problem. The team doctor Derek White thought that Wood was strong as a bull.

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Three days of preparation time passed by quickly,. In the blink of an eye, it was the last day before the competition. On this afternoon, the teams would go to the Bernabeu stadium for a ground adaptation while the two managers would bring a player to the last news conference before the final match.

The Italian team was arranged to enter the Bernabeu adaptation site first, after the adaptation training, the head coach Lippi brought the Italian captain Chiellini to partake in the news conference.

During the meeting, the reporters were most interested in the first and final face-off between the two coaches. Lippi and Twain were both highly-known and successful managers in European football but they have never had an encounter. Lippi did not talk about Twain during his most popular years. Twain would definitely not take the initiative to mention someone who was unrelated to him at all, regardless of whether he was the head coach of a championship team.

But today, it was clearly inevitable that the two of them would be taken out to make a comparison.

After asking the routine questions, a reporter for the Italy's Milan Sport stood up and asked the question: "Marcelo, what do you think of Tony Twain?"

"He's a very good manager and the trophies he's brought to Nottingham Forest are testament to his ability." Lippi's answer was not surprising at all, because this was a fact.

And it was clear that such an answer could not satisfy the journalists.

"But he has not made any convincing achievements in the national team coaching field..." continued the Milan Sports reporter.

"I don't think it's a problem. England's performance at this European Championship was impressive and this was what he has achieved." This time, the answer was beginning to excite the reporters. Because as an opponent, following common sense, one should not praise the other party so easily, and what's more is that Lippi was a coach who has gotten almost all of the honour a coach was able to obtain, able to obtain his compliments was not easy.

So was his praise for Twain a smoke bomb or genuine?

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While Lippi was accepting the questions from the reporters, Twain was already waiting outside with George Wood. As the media was interested in the first encounter between Twain and Lippi, the duration of the news conference would definitely be extended.

From the door, one was able to see the situation inside, and also able to hear the noises inside. But most of it was in Italian so Twain was unable to comprehend the conversations inside.

He might as well chat with Wood outside.

“How’s your mother’s health, George?”

“She is still fine...” That was what he said, but his face was expressionless so Twain could easily guess that the situation was definitely not ideal. However, he was unable to help George Wood in this aspect at all so he could only sigh inside. It was as if such a pitiful woman was sent onto mankind just to suffer.

“Would your mum watch the finals?”

“She’ll watch the television broadcast.”

“Perform better, get a trophy to make her happy.”

Wood nodded.

It suddenly turned silent again between the two people, they both seemed to have internal troubles. Wood then took the initiative to break this silence, “How are you... and Shania?”

Twain glanced at Wood with a smile, “Wood would also show some concern to other people, that’s rare. How well can we be? It’s the same every time, I’m busy with my work and she’s busy with hers. Every year we get more and more distant. For you though, you’re already 30 years old, if you do not find any women by this age, there would be people who would suspect your sexuality, George.”

Wood pouted, “Then do what you want.”

“You are really optimistic.” Twain looked at Wood as he chuckled. “The best gay magazines had already placed you as the most ideal partner in the hearts of the gay men for three consecutive years.”

Twain was really worried for Wood’s life issues, so he borrowed the name of homosexuality to affect him. However, the Westerns do not regard continuing the generation as highly as the Asians, else Twain would definitely bring out the theory of “one having nothing to be proud of if he is unfilial”, using his mother’s name to pressurize Wood.

“Tomorrow is the finals, and you still have the mentality to consider all these?” Wood rebutted.

“What should be done are already done, what else is there to do? Frown and stay silent?” Twain was smiling brightly. “That was not my personality. Besides...” He pointed Lippi who was in the room. “We can’t be looked down upon by our enemies. George, relax a little. We are the ones who obtained all three prestigious trophies, what hardships have we not seen? Ha!”

In the middle of their conversation, the news conference inside the room has ended. In the midst of the applause, Lippi pulled back his chair as he left the room behind Chellini out of the exit.

Lippi was a little surprised when he saw Twain who was smiling at him, but his expression quickly returned to normal.

He knew that Twain was greeting him with a smile, as this manager did not seem to be as vicious and untouchable as the outside world had been rumoured. Since the other side took the initiative to show kindness, Lippi also did not need to look arrogant, as he slightly nodded when he looked at Twain.

Perhaps it was due to it being finals but Lippi, who attended the press conference today, did not wear the Kappa T-shirt he usually wore on the training ground. Instead, he wore a very formal dark blue suit and white shirt. The two men passed by. Twain kept his eyes on George Wood instead of Lippi's back view and the opposing captain Chellini started a spark upon their contact. Both of them stared at each other.

After leaving the press conference, the old smoker Lippi put an end to his own suffering. He pulled out a Tuscan cigar out from within his suit and placed it in his mouth. He lit it and took a deep breath, one so loud that even Twain could hear that noise.

With a cigar in his mouth, Lippi and Chellini left just like that. And Twain just patted Wood who was beside him, "Let's go, George. It's our turn."

He did not smoke — not that he needed it to look cool. He was the embodiment of the word "cool". Especially when he appeared in front of the media, that continuous flashing of the lights, could clearly represent that Tony Twain was not far off with his odds from getting the world championships from Lippi.

"What do you think about Marcelo Lippi, Mr Twain?" After the routine questions, Twain needed to face this similar question as well.

"He is an outstanding head coach. He led Juventus and Italy to obtain those championship trophies, it was long proving that point." Twain did not hesitate nor was surprised, he answered quickly.

But for the journalists who could understand English and Italian, they laughed out loud. Because this was similar too coincidental, Lippi used the same words to answer the question.

Even their acts of being low profile was so similar, no wonder they are the opponents for the finals of the world championships.

Twain was laughed at inexplicably, but he did not ask what had happened.

"Is it a little difficult to play against such a coach in the final?" A reporter from Milan Sports asked.

"I admit it's a bit difficult, after all, Lippi is experienced. But ..." Twain's tone changed a little, "No one came to the Bernabeu stadium to compete for the runner-up. I'm sure Lippi would think the same way, being able to beat Italy and obtain the championships, I would be extremely happy."

"Mr Twain, you intentionally and surprisingly acted low profile, was that to let Italy underestimate you?" The reporter from Milan Sports was very aggressive.

"No, it's not." Twain spread his hands. "You're insulting Mr. Lippi's IQ. He didn't forget to use comedy against the Italian journalist, for his constant aggression. "I do have a lot of respect for Lippi and I'm happy to play against him in the final. "

Twain did not lie. Although as a fan, Twain hated Juventus and Lippi, but after becoming a coach, there has been a change of mind, everything was thought about from the coach's point of view, his mindset was becoming similar as that Italian coach. Being the head coach, the tactics master was deserving of his respect.

And Twain also knew that, with Lippi's experience, it's himself who would end up losing out if he provoked a war of words. Lippi's Italian team would definitely not be fooled, and for England who was always on the initiative would fall, their morale would definitely take a huge hit. Psychological warfare was not always a treasure that was sure-fire.

This double-edged sword, if used poorly, would hurt yourself, so Twain had always went for the easier alternative.

Lippi was an old fox, a stone, if he screws up, he would mess up his own and teammates' morale.

"I hope that there would be an exciting contest tomorrow, but that does not mean I would promise that I'll play an offensive ball game." Twain slyly laughed, "For me, the results are the priority."

Hearing him say this, some of the reporters sighed. It looks like the finals match tomorrow would be a boring match, if there are no surprises, it is mostly likely going to end in a penalty shootout.

On the other hand, some reporters heard what they wanted. Tomorrow, tomorrow England was likely to be defensive, probably prioritizing defensively counter-attacking, sacrificing offense, and dragging them into extra-time and penalty shoot-outs.

The original tactic that was covered up for three days, and this was what Twain implemented for the English team? That was so boring...

Defensive, defensive, defensive... someone please knock open his brain to see if there was anything inside other than "defense".

Twain would not go ahead and think about what the reporters were discussing, after answering the reporters' questions, Wood and him left the Bernabeu stadium as he took the team bus and followed the team back to the hotel that they were staying in. There would be a final tactical meeting tonight, then after would be the quiet wait for tomorrow's night.

His first time leading a country team into the World-level championships match was approaching so quickly. (To be continued, if you want to know what happens later, please log in to www.qidian.com, where there would be more chapters, support the author, support genuine reading!

Chapter 965: Tickets

The hotels in Madrid were having a booming business and it was impossible to get a room at this moment. The main reason for that were the English.

As the England national team had reached final of a major international competition for the first time in 50 years, there was a huge repercussion back in England. Many of the England fans who were not planning to watch the competition live in Spain initially, packed up and flew to Madrid. It was already extremely difficult to get a ticket to the final, but the English still hoped to meet people who were wanted to get a refund for their tickets outside the Bernabeu stadium.

As for the problem of no lodging? That was not a problem at all. They would sleep on the streets just to watch the match. Many England fans brought their own tents as if they were going to camp out in the woods. The passion of the England fans was obvious for everyone to see.

Due to the massive influx of England fans, the Madrid government had no choice but to announce that all the major parks in the city would be open to public at night for those fans who could not get a hotel room to camp in.

"I feel extra blessed watching them!" Skinny Bill exclaimed as he pointed to rows of colorful tents on the streets opposite the seat of a bar that he was seated in, "Not only do we not need to sleep on the streets, we also have tickets to the final!"

He was a little loud and he attracted the attention of the people around them. John noticed the look of desire in their eyes and he knew that those were the people without tickets to the final. They were very sensitive to everything about tickets.

"Keep it down you fool! Are you trying to get us attacked?" John gave Bill a slap on his head.

"Uh..." Bill looked down and drank his beer. However, it was not long before he stretched himself and said, "It's five more hours to the match, that's a long way to go... Why don't we go wait at the hotel that the England team is staying in like the others? We might even get their autograph..."

John glared at him and said, "Have you forgotten what kind of person Tony is? Forget about the fans, he would even chase the reporters out at a time like this. What do you think you can achieve there?"

"Ah, that's right... It's the same situation every time Nottingham Forest got into a final. Hey, do you think Tony's nervous?"

"Nervous?" The others asked, perplexed.

"Yes, even though he's not a rookie who just started managing, this is the first final he has been to as the manager of the national team after all. And it's the final of the European Championship which we've never won before."

After hearing Bill say that, everyone grew silent. After a long while, someone muttered, "Has any of you seen Tony nervous before?"

He looked at the rest and they answered him by shaking their heads.

"Tony had never been afraid of anyone in my impression. He fought with Michael the first day he was at Burns' bar, ha ha! Michael is well-known to be a good fighter in our area!" Someone laughed and said.

However, their moods dropped the moment they mentioned Michael. They thought about their old friend whom they had not met for a very long time. He was working hard for his family and career in America and they did not know if he was still paying attention to football, or if he even knew that England had reached the European Championship final. They were all football fanatics and the stories that they had with football were different for each of them. However, it only brought sadness to Michael once, and it was unforgettable.

The person who mentioned it realized that he should not have mentioned that name. He gave a couple of awkward laughs and looked down while drinking his beer.

"I know that Tony would send Michael a ticket every time the team got into a final. Too bad there isn't a chance anymore ever since he resigned from Forest. I wonder if he did it this time?" Fat John mentioned their old friend deliberately.

Everyone became silent as John mentioned the past. They were thinking if their old friend on the other side of the earth received a ticket.

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Michael was in his suit at his door with his suitcase next to him. It was seven in the morning in West America and he needed to get to work.

His wife carried their child as they sent him off.

"I'll be back for dinner if I don't have to entertain anyone at night..." He wanted to kiss his wife, but she avoided it.

"You have to come back for dinner no matter what," His wife glared at him, "Don't tell me you forgot about Shannon's birthday?"

"Ah..." There was an apologetic look on Michael's face.

"What are you thinking about recently, Michel? You've been very distracted, and you were even in a daze while eating," His wife complained unhappily.

"I'm sorry, I was too busy at work. There were some personnel changes in the office and the pressure is mounting..." Michael could only appease her with that, "After this period of time, I'll definitely take a few days off and take the two of you out for a good time." After saying that, he pinched the pinchable cheeks of his daughter in his wife's arms, "Sorry Shannon. Daddy forgot about your birthday, don't be mad okay?"

His three-year-old daughter replied in her cute voice, "I—won't—."

Michael laughed and looked at his wife, "See, our little princess isn't mad."

"What am I going to do with you," His wife pouted helplessly and gave him a goodbye kiss.

After a passionate kiss, Michael opened the door and left.

On his Ford, Michael was waiting for the traffic light at the crossroad. Even though his hands were on the steering wheel, his eyes glanced towards the black suitcase on the front seat. His wife was really observant. He was indeed distracted recently, but it was not because of stress from work. He was busy, but after being so busy for so many years, he did not forget about the death anniversary of his son, Gavin Bernard.

The reason for his distraction recently was sitting quietly inside the suitcase.

Michael looked up at the traffic light and thought that the red light was a little longer than usual. It was normal for there to be traffic during morning rush hour anyway. He grabbed hold of the suitcase and took out an envelope. The handwriting on the envelope was familiar to him, and it reminded him of that person's face.

Michael opened it and took out something from inside—A ticket to the European Championship final.

The passion that Americans have for football was pitiful when compared to the Europeans. The European Championship which had no relationship to America was something that they had even lesser

interest in and there was hardly any news about it on the news media. The media was all over the NBA grand finals between the Lakers and the 76ers. That attracted the attention of all the basketball fans in the world. It was a totally different world here when compared to Europe.

Michael was not a basketball fan. Not before, not now and probably not ever. But he had indeed not cared about football for a very long time. Looking at this ticket, he knew that Tony Twain must have led England to the European Championship final.

That was something to be happy about. After all, England had not reached the final of any major international competition for the past 50 years. However, this ticket brought back many memories. Memories that had nothing to do with England or the European Championship.

He was keeping his promise made to his wife so many years back. Therefore, when Twain did not send him tickets to any finals for the past two years, his life had no relationship with football at all. He lived like any other normal person, working hard everyday for a living and to support his family. Three years ago, they had a daughter and the focus of their lives turned to his daughter, Shannon Bernard. He loved this daughter of his and gave her all his love. He did not want the story that happened to Gavin to happen to Shannon too. His wife loved their daughter too and her smiling face will always make her forget about the pain of losing a son.

However, two years later, a ticket from the continent of Europe brought Michael back to the days when he was fanatical about football.

He started to seriously think about finding a quiet place during breaktime in the afternoon for him to watch a match.

A sharp horn woke the reminiscing Michael and he realized that the traffic light had turned green, and there was a line forming behind him. There were horns all around him, hurrying the bastard who was blocking traffic ahead.

Michael placed the ticket back into the envelope and drove his car out.

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Kerslake was standing in the quiet cemetery alone. This was a place of few visitors and the trees covered the skies. The temperature there was a couple of degrees lower than outside and there were some birds chirping. Other than that, there was no sounds from any other living creatures.

This was his second time there. The first was during Gavin Bernard's funeral. All the Nottingham Forest members attended it. Even the old club chairman sent his assistant so he, as the youth team coach, naturally did not absent himself from it.

After that, he had never returned here. For some people, the child who passed away that day was one of the most important people of their lives, but to David Kerslake, he did not have that feeling.

Two days ago, Kerslake received a call from Twain while having a break at home. Twain asked Kerslake for a favor over the phone. Twain would usually do this himself, but he was far away in Spain then. He could not possibly leave the team and fly back to Nottingham himself, therefore, he could only ask his friend in Nottingham for help.

On the next day, Kerslake received an express mail with a ticket inside.

Today, he was here to send Gavin Bernard a ticket.

Of course, he did not forget to buy some flowers. Twain did not ask him to do that but since he was here to visit Gavin, some flowers was just the necessary etiquette.

Placing the fresh flowers on the grave carefully, Kerslake noticed the line of words on the bottom of the tombstone.

He suddenly felt that the world was so unpredictable. The most loyal fan of Nottingham Forest was buried here yet he was still loafing at home after leaving Forest where he had worked for more than a decade.

He did not know if Twain would ever return, but maybe the period of time in his life which belonged to Nottingham Forest had reached the end. He should seriously start to think about the invitation of the other clubs.

“Gavin, this is the first time I’m talking to you but I didn’t expect it to be under this kind of circumstances,” Kerslake laughed and said, “Tony asked me to give you a ticket, and I want to take this chance to say farewell to you. Thank you for your support towards the team, I bet you’re very sad at the state of affairs of Nottingham Forest now, aren’t you? I tried my best, too bad... Maybe this is for the best. At least we’re still in the Premier League. 14 years ago, we were still struggling in the Championship. Maybe this is where Nottingham Forest belongs to. No team can win forever, and no team can conquer Europe forever. We’ve done it before, there’s nothing to regret about.”

He took out the ticket and did as Twain instructed. He lit it on fire with a lighter and held on to it until the fire reached his fingertips. The ticket burnt to ashes on the way down and landed on the fresh flowers.

“It’s not bad to be a fan too... Goodbye Gavin, remember to watch the final.”

Kerslake waved at the grave and tuned to walk towards the gate of the cemetery.

A gust of wind blew behind him and moved the flowers on the grave, blowing the ashes into the air. There were rustling sounds coming from the thick woods, as if they were saying goodbye to Kerslake.

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Tang Jing was sitting on her husband’s legs as she flirted with him. Their son had just been brought back to their home in China and her parents were taking care of him. They could enjoy some time alone now. In her plans, she was going to have a romantic candlelight dinner with her husband tonight, then put on some erotic lingerie that she just bought and have a night of passion with him.

However, her plans were stopped by her husband before she even said anything.

“I can finally not be disturbed when watching the match tonight,” Tang said while holding Tang Jing. Tang Jing immediately felt disappointment.

“It’s not a match involving China, why are you watching it?”

“I’m a football coach, I have to know everything related to football,” Tang felt that it was strange for Tang Jing to ask such a silly question.

Tang Jing rolled her eyes at him, “But tonight, I...” She stopped herself, Tang must have known what she meant.

As expected, Tang knew, but his reaction infuriated her.

“We can do that every night, but the European Championship final only happens once every four years...”

Tang Jing was furious, but she had to admit that there was nothing wrong with the logic. They could make love every night but the next time the European Championship final happened would be four years later.

“Can’t you record it?!”

“Of course, I’ll record it, but it’s also important to watch it live...” Tang was sticking to his guns—— Tonight, football was more important than coitus.

Tang Jing got up from Tang’s legs furiously, and she pinched Tang on the shoulders violently. The look of Tang gritting his teeth in pain did nothing to sooth the anger in Tang Jing’s heart.

She had already decided that she would be a force of disturbance when Tang was watching the match tonight.

To the simple-minded Tang, tonight was all about football. However, to Tang Jing, tonight was a battle between her and football. She wanted to see whether she was more attractive or whether football was more attractive.

Fighting with me over my man? Football, I’ll show you!

Chapter 966: Are You Nervous?

Where in England would there be a lot of customers after night falls on the 8th of July?

Without a question, it would be the bars. And, to be more specific, the bars where one is able to watch a televised football match.

The British enjoy watching football in groups. They would rather head down to a bar and watch a football match with their friends over a drink instead of watching it in their own homes.

The BBC5 channel aired a pre-match analysis two hours before the finals kicked off. The pundits did an in-depth discussion of the match and analyzed it from different angles. It was the first time in 50 years that England has made its way into the finals of an international football competition. The channel has to make sure that their show reflects the significance of the match or the viewers could end up being upset.

Dunn was not the kind of person who enjoyed being in a crowd. He prefers watching the live coverage of the football match at home quietly than in a noisy environment.

However, it seems like he would not be getting the peace and quiet that he seeks tonight.

“Dear~” His wife, Tang Jing, stood before him while being dressed in sexy lingerie, and she blocked the television screen with her body. “Do I look beautiful in this?”

“You do.” Dunn’s eyes never left the television screen. He shifted to a different seat after seeing that Tang Jing had blocked his view. Alan Shearer was predicting the England team’s potential line-up for the match on the screen. Twain did not change one bit. He would not reveal his starting line-up for the match until the very last minute, just as he has always done in the past.

Even a fool could tell that Dunn did not really mean what he said. Fury flashed across Tang Jing’s face. She shifted her position after seeing Dunn change his seat.

“Do you want me or not?” Tang Jing was not embarrassed to say such words. She has become bold after spending so much time in England. The Chinese might be known to be more bashful when it comes to speaking about topics like these, but no such bashfulness exists in Tang Jing any longer.

Dunn averted his gaze towards Tang Jing. He watched as his wife lowered her bra straps all the way to her elbow and revealed her breasts partially. Thereafter, he shook his head and said, “No.”

His words made Tang Jing feel humiliated. Dunn realized that he had said something wrong after seeing that his wife was about to explode from anger. He quickly added, “I just don’t feel like doing it tonight.”

He did not salvage the situation with his words. All he did was to add fuel to the fire.

Tang Jing erupted like a volcano. She removed her bra and tossed it at Dunn’s face. “Do it with your football then!”

Tang Jing stormed back into her room with two balls of bouncing flesh before her chest, and she did not forget to slam the door shut behind her after entering the room. The impact of her door slam was so great that some of the dust on the ceiling fell off.

Dunn looked at the closed bedroom door and smiled helplessly before directing his attention back onto the television screen. He can finally watch the match in peace now. He heard sounds of items being thrown onto the floor from the bedroom shortly after, but he ignored them.

“... England has yet to set off for the stadium, but we can already see some players at the hotel’s lobby...”

Scenes of the hotel’s interior were being shown on the television screen. The video was taken by the reporter from a distance, and it was a little blurry as a result. However, one is still able to make out players like Rooney and Mitchell from the video. As for Twain, he is still nowhere to be seen, and the camera continues to shift about in an attempt to search for him.

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Twain sat at a corner of the lobby where the cameras would not be able to capture him. He was able to see the lift from where he sat, and he conversed with Des Walker while paying attention to the players who walked out from the lift. He was trying to take attendance and determine if there are any players who are still in their rooms.

“Des, are you nervous?” Twain asked.

“A little. Are you not nervous?” Walker asked back.

“Of course I’m a little nervous.” Twain laughed. “Can’t you see that I’ve been chewing on gum all this time?” He pointed at his mouth. “I’ve been chewing for close to an hour.”

“Why do you still chew on it when it’s tasteless?”

“You are right.” Twain spit his gum into the wrapper and tossed it into the bin. He then fished out another piece of gum and placed it into his mouth. “I should buy bubble gum next time. At least it’d be fun to chew on it.”

“I don’t think you are nervous at all, Tony...”

Twain was surprised by Walker’s words. “Really? That’s good!”

Twain was truly feeling nervous at the moment. However, he did not really want others to discern that he was nervous. He wanted to divert his attention onto something else, and that is why he chose to sit at the hotel lobby and have an idle chat with Walker. It seems like talking to Walker has definitely helped to calm his nerves.

The player who walked out of the lift was Mitchell. His height caused him to stick out like a sore thumb. Twain noticed the look of depression upon his countenance. It looks like the kid is still harping over the fact that he is unable to play in the finals.

“Aaron, come over here!” Twain shouted and waved his hands.

Mitchell walked over obediently.

“Sit.” Twain pointed at the sofa across of him. “That seat is reserved for the coaches. The players who are playing in the finals later are not able to enjoy this privilege that I’m offering to you now.”

Twain joked with Mitchell.

“Thanks boss...” Mitchell knew that Twain was trying to comfort him. He was still feeling upset on the inside, but he did not show it through his mannerisms.

“Don’t think too much about it. Just sit back and enjoy the moment when we are crowned champions.” Twain walked over and patted Mitchell on the shoulder.

“But, it’s not like I did anything to help the team achieve it. I just can’t enjoy becoming champions like this...”

“That’s not true. You are doing something for the team in your own way. Think about it. What do you think your teammates will feel when they see you sitting by the side of the pitch with a glum face? They would definitely be affected emotionally and they would end up performing poorly in the match. I’m not joking about this. Won’t you feel upset if you saw someone who is pulling a long face or who looks disinterested sitting by the side while you are working hard on the pitch?”

Mitchell froze. He has to admit that his boss's words were very persuasive. He imagined himself being on the pitch and encountering a situation like that, and he came to the conclusion that he would certainly be affected emotionally if he saw those scenes.

"Smile, Aaron." Twain grinned at Mitchell. "Our smiles possess a mysterious power. Your smile can infect your teammates and it can help them feel even more confident about overcoming their obstacles and defeating their opponents. Remember this. No matter what happens, all of you form a whole entity. You are always going to affect your teammates whether you play in a match or not, and affecting your teammates means that you will affect the results of the match as well. I would get angry when we are losing in a match, but I've never pulled a face while I'm watching a match from the side. Do you know why? It's because I can convert my anger into motivation, but being depressed only causes others to lose their fight and confidence. It's just like a contagious disease."

Mitchell suddenly saw the light once Twain finished his words.

"I understand now, boss." Mitchell led out a smile.

"Good. Go back to the team now. You have been stripped of the right to sit at that very seat from here on out!"

Mitchell stood to his feet and left hastily.

"I want you to talk to them. Don't let them play in the match while being worried about you." Twain's voice emerged from behind. Mitchell turned his head around and replied, "I know that!"

"I'm very impressed, Tony." Des Walker lamented as he watched Mitchell run away from them looking full of energy. Mitchell looked like a totally different person. The kid who had walked over to them with a sullen face earlier was nowhere to be found. "I've not come across many people who are as skilled as you are when it comes to managing the psychological state of players."

"It's actually very simple. You just need to put yourselves in the players' shoes and be sincere with your words." Twain reclined against the sofa, and he noticed Wood walking out of the lift. Wood was the last one to come down. It looks like he had carried out his duties as the captain of the team, and he had only come down after ensuring that all his teammates had already gone down ahead of him.

Twain lifted his wrist towards him and glanced at his watch. There were still close to two hours before the match kicked off.

"It's about time. I don't want to stay here and be watched by the reporters as though we are a bunch of monkeys at the zoo. Let's go." Twain stood to his feet. His gesture signaled to the other players who were still lounging around the lobby and chatting with one another that it was time to leave. Everyone stood to their feet and walked towards the bus that was parked right outside the entrance to the hotel.

The reporters outside the hotel became excited when they noticed that the players were headed towards the entrance. They all came out of hiding and rushed towards the entrance to capture photos of the players up close, but they were blocked by a line of security guards.

The England fans were less rowdy. All they did was to stand behind the security guards and shout, "We are the champions! We are the champions! England! England! Ohhh!"

“They have set off!” The reporter from BBC5 yelled excitedly.

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Elsewhere, an Italian television host also announced how the Italy national team was on its way to become the champions excitedly. Both teams had set off for the Bernabéu Stadium at the same time.

Two buses of different colors drove towards the Bernabéu Stadium in different directions. Several police cars drove before the buses, and they helped to control the traffic. There were also helicopters flying above the buses, and they have been flown by the television stations to capture the teams’ journeys towards the stadium. It was truly a sight to behold. Both teams were making grand entrances.

The bus carrying the England team pulled up outside the Bernabéu Stadium soon after. The entire England team could hear the din coming from within the stadium as they sat within the air-conditioned bus.

The Santiago Bernabéu Stadium is basked in a blinding white light before them. It is just like the ‘White House’ of the footballing world, and it eagerly awaits the arrival of the two stars for tonight’s show.

The players alighted from the bus a moment later. A commotion broke out when the players appeared before a crowd of reporters and fans. The security guards at the scene fought hard to keep the crowd back. The players are used to seeing scenes like these, and they did not stop in their tracks to entertain the crowd. They simply walked into the stadium and towards their locker room.

The last one to get off the bus was Twain, and he accepted a brief interview from BBC5 as he stood behind the line of security guards.

“It is said that there are many British fans who have flown over to Spain over the past few days. Clearly, none of them expected their team to be able to make its way into the finals. What are your thoughts on this, Mr. Twain?” The reporter pressed onto his earpiece with one hand and held onto a microphone with the other. He had spoken very quickly, but Twain was still able to make out what he said due to his good pronunciation.

“I’m very pleased.” Twain raised his voice as he responded. “I actually wish that the Bernabéu would allow the England fans without tickets to enter! Ha! That’d help us turn this stadium into our own home grounds! But, I doubt the Italians would agree to this!”

“Is Italy a very strong team?”

“Of course. All teams that are able to make its way into the finals are strong teams. Even teams like Greece have to be regarded as a strong team if they are in the finals.”

“You have good memories about the Bernabéu Stadium, don’t you?”

“Indeed.” A smile emerged on Twain’s face as he spoke. “I was able to achieve the Treble at this very stadium two years ago. I like the Bernabéu.”

“If you don’t mind me asking again, how has Mitchell’s absence impacted the team for the finals?”

“I don’t think his absence affects the team much. We are not a one-man team. We are a whole entity. Every single player who has been selected to be a part of the national team is talented. I’m not worried about the absence of one player.”

Twain waved his hands and signaled that he wanted to leave.

The reporter heard an anxious voice coming from his earpiece. “Ask him one last question! Don’t let him go just yet! The audience needs to hear his declaration! His declaration that England would become the champions! Get him to say it!”

“Wait a moment, Mr. Twain. Please wait for a moment...” The reporter reached out a hand and stopped Twain from leaving before he pressed a hand on his earpiece and listened to the director’s newest set of instructions. “One last question. Have you ever thought about what happens if...”

Twain cut the reporter off curtly before he could even finish his words. “Impossible. That’s definitely impossible. We are not here to work hard and get second place!”

Twain was quite upset with the reporter’s idiotic question. He turned around and walked away with no intention of stopping this time round.

After Twain left, the reporter noticed that the cameraman had given him a thumbs up. He then heard the director’s voice from his earpiece, and the director sounded pleased. “Excellent work, Louis! Those words from Twain were exactly what I was looking for! Okay, I want you to go into the stadium now and wait for the players to do their warm-ups!”

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Likewise, at another entrance leading into the Bernabéu Stadium, the Italy team was also warmly greeted by the press and their fans.

Lippi was dressed like an Italian gentleman. He had donned a tuxedo and he held onto a cigar in one hand. There was an air of poise and elegance around him.

He stopped in his tracks and accepted an interview with Radiotelevisione italiana while his players walked past him from behind and entered the stadium.

“Is it good news that England is without Mitchell for this match?”

“No, they still have Rooney and other talented attacking players.” Lippi did not display any optimism. “Mitchell is not the core of the team. His absence does not affect England by much.”

“Do you think the match will go to a penalty shoot-out?”

“I can’t say for sure. It depends on the score after 90 minutes have been played.” Lippi did not give anything away.

“This is your last time in charge of the Italy national team. Do you wish to end your career with a Euro Cup trophy?”

“Of course. I hope we can bring the Euro Cup trophy back to Italy.”

“There are some people who are worried that you’d experience a lack of motivation to win the competition since you are a manager who has lifted almost every possible trophy in your career...”

“I’ve never lifted the Euro Cup trophy before.” Lippi was not upset with the comment. He responded with a smile.

“Thank you for accepting the interview. Good luck for the match.”

“I wish Italy all the best,” Lippi replied.

“He’s never arrogant and he never underestimates his opponents either. He’s a mature and composed manager. He is a manager that instills confidence in us.” The reporter spoke before the camera after Lippi left. “I believe that Tony Twain has met his match this time. Should I wish Twain all the best? No, I should wish that all the good luck in the world would not get close to him and his team. We would see you again after the break!”

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“Crap, I’m feeling a little nervous...” Joe Mattock stood by the side of the pitch and lifted his head to look at the stadium that was packed with spectators. A thought flashed by his mind – he was really at the finals. This is the finals match of the Euro Cup. This is the very first time in 50 years that England is participating in the finals of an international competition!

Mattock felt his knees go weak at the thought. His heart started palpitating at an accelerated pace, and his lips became dry as well.

“F*ck!” Mitchell cursed from the side. “If you are nervous then switch places with me! I can play as left back! Can you please get yourself together? You are a player from Nottingham Forest! Don’t embarrass us!”

The words that Twain said to Mitchell earlier had clearly worked. Mitchell was all pumped up and full of fight now.

“Uh...” Joe Mattock scratched the back of his head in shame. He felt less nervous after being scolded by Mitchell.

In truth, Joe Mattock was not the only player who was feeling nervous. The other players were simply not as forthcoming as he was. However, they all felt like they were foolish to be feeling this nervous after hearing Mitchell’s words. There was someone amongst them who was unable to feel nervous even if he wanted to! How could they be thinking about how nervous they are when they are playing in the match later? Their minds should be full of thoughts about the match that they would play in soon!

“Go and do your warm-up, lads. What are you all doing here? Discussing about the weather?”

Twain’s voice rang from behind the players’ backs, and a group of people rushed onto the pitch hastily.

Chapter 967: Nepotism

Twain was a little bit nervous himself, however, it was not as bad as some of the players. He had been to many important finals previously, but he was just a little bit nervous about this first time—The first time he led the national team to the final of a major international competition.

As a manager whose past life was a Chinese football fan, he had a little “international competition” complex. The World Cup and European Championship were the main focus of his football life for a very long time. There was even a period of time when he thought that national teams were better than clubs as they represented the best team in the country.

All these became a joke later. However, he is still a little excited to be able to take part in the final of a major international competition like the European Championship.

He chose to leave the empty changing room to calm himself down. Work could make him forget about all other emotions and he watched the players warm up at the sideline.

He was very satisfied with the players’ warmup. Everyone was very excited when faced with a final like this and he had no need to be concerned about their morale. All he had to worry about was that someone might be overzealous during warmup and hurt himself.

The coaches had the warmup under control and Twain turned his attention to the stands as he had some time. The Bernabéu, with a capacity of 80,000, were full to its brim. The noise from the crowd was deafening and there were thousands of flags waving about in the wind. There were even some people who could not control their excitement and set off mini fireworks in the stands.

The English fans in the stands started to sing together when they saw the England team appear on the pitch for their warmup. Just like what they did during the English Premier League matches, they used their singing to convey a message to the players—We are with you.

This singing gave the English players the feeling that they were at their home ground. In fact, the number of fans from both sides were almost even. As Spain lost in the semi-final, most of the Spanish population lost interest in the final. This meant that the England fans who flew to Spain from England just before the final were in luck. There were many Spanish fans selling their tickets outside the Bernabéu the day before the final. The same could be said for the Italy fans who just flew in from Italy.

The neutral Spain fans on the stands were just the supporting cast for this match.

Right after the England fans started singing, the Italy fans started singing themselves. The fans from both sides started a “singing contest” across the pitch.

The media from different countries started to get busy as the teams started their warmup on the pitch.

“This is Spain Football at the Santiago Bernabéu. There will be a heavyweight battle right here, in front of millions of fans all over the world!” The China national television CCTV5 also dispatched a commentator and reporter to the stadium to give live commentary about the match. Even though the standard of China football was very low, the Chinese fans were still considered to be quite blessed. The development of television and the internet network allowed them to watch the best games in the world, and it was basically free.

“England will be in their white jersey in this match. However, it was said that their manager, Tony Twain, hoped that the team would be wearing their red jersey as red is not only his lucky color, but also the

same color as the Nottingham Forest jersey. Looks like his wish was not fulfilled...” The reporter from Spain Football was introducing some of the smaller details, such as the jerseys, to the audience, “Italy will be in their traditional blue jersey with white shorts. This is the jersey that they were wearing when they won the World Cup 10 years ago. And further back, 16 years ago, when they lost to France in the European Championship final, they were in their white jersey. Maybe to the Italians, blue is more auspicious than white.”

“The temperature tonight is 31 degrees, not too hot but it’s not exactly cooling either. It was very hot in the day and the heat from the day has not disperse yet which will inevitably affect the play of both sides. The humidity of the stadium...”

Even though their own teams were eliminated, the media of the other countries still paid a lot of attention on the reporting of the final. Just the satellite vans outside the Bernabéu stadium alone had 27 of them. It was quite a sight to see them lined up together.

“Here we see the players of both sides appearing on the pitch for their warmup. We’ve already gotten the starting lineup for Italy but England’s starting lineup is still nowhere to be seen... Seems like Tony Twain will not release the starting lineup until the final moment. He seems to be too cautious when compared to the experienced Lippi...”

“From the lineup that we have, it appears that Italy has sent out their strongest team here. The goalkeeper is AC Milan’s Marco Amelia. The left-back is AC Milan’s Simone Vitale and the right-back will be Inter Milan’s Davide Santon. Their two center-backs are the Juventus pairing—Giorgio Chiellini and Domenico Criscito. Their midfield, from left to right, comprises of Juventus’ Sebastian Giovinco, Roma’s Daniele De Rossi and Alberto Aquilani and Davide Lanzafame, also from Juventus. The two strikers are AC Milan’s Alberto Paloschi and Juventus’ Salvatore Foti. What we can tell from this lineup is that Lippi trusts players from the traditional strong teams more than players from mid-table teams. The starting lineup comprises of players only from the top four teams of last season Serie A and amongst the four teams, he prefers players from Juventus...”

When the England players finished their warmup and returned to the changing room, the media finally received the starting lineup for England from Twain. Twain did not give them lots of surprises as he did in the past few matches, and his starting lineup here was not much different from the one that experts predicted before the match. The only surprise was that Vaughan, who performed very well in the semi-final, did not get to start.

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Even the England players themselves did not know who was starting until now, let alone the media.

Goalkeeper, Joe Hart, was the only one who was sure of his position. Almost every other position had been changed during the course of the competition except for his position. As long as there were no major mistakes or injuries, the position of starting goalkeeper would usually not be changed.

The right-back was still Richards, who had been starting ever since the match against Wales. Twain preferred his defensive capabilities. The left-back was Joe Mattock. In this European Championship, Mattock was under scrutiny and he passed the test. It was normal for him to continue starting. Just like

how Lippi preferred the Juventus players that he managed before, Twain also preferred the Nottingham Forest players that he managed before.

The center-backs were John Terry and Steven Taylor. This center-back pairing had been playing for England ever since the first match of the competition, the synergy between them had been tested.

In midfield, there was the pairing of Gerrard and Wood. Twain's "Wood-Gerrard" pairing was much more effective than the "Gerrard-Lampard" duo during the Eriksson and McClaren era. That was because he had a all-rounded George Wood who could play as a core or as a supporting role for other players, which meant that the England midfield would not be too messy due to too many core players. There are some teams that can play with a duo core, but England definitely could not.

On the right was Walcott, coming back from his injury to claim a starting berth. The right winger position was one which had the most changes due to injuries throughout the competition. Walcott's advantage over Bentley and Moke was that he had faster speed and better dribbling abilities.

On the left was Middlesbrough's Downing. Just like Walcott, he had superior speed and dribbling technique. He returned to the starting lineup due to Twain's tactics for this match.

The striker's position was one which people were most interested in. Mitchell was suspended because he accumulated too many yellow cards, and this became the position where the competition was most intense. Everyone hoped to start in such an important final. Rooney was definitely going to start for sure. As the most experienced player amongst England's striking options, Twain needed him very much.

But who would be Rooney's partner?

James Vaughan was one of the favorites because of his brace in the semi-final. He himself thought that he was in good form recently and should be able to start in the final. So, when Twain started to announce the starting lineup, he was anticipating to hear his name being read out.

After reading out Rooney's name, there was only one last name to be read. Vaughan sat up straight and prepared to welcome the historic moment—He would be the starting striker in the European Championship final.

"Agbonlahor."

However, the name that came out of Twain's mouth stunned him.

He did not expect Twain to pick Agbonlahor, who did not have any standout performance, instead of himself. He looked at Twain with a bemused look on his face, but he did not say anything. He looked down and clenched both fists in anger.

Twain's decision shocked the other players. Everyone else thought that the other starting striker would definitely be James. Even Agbonlahor did not expect himself to be starting in such an important match and the surprise and happiness combined to make give him a very complex feeling. He did not even dare to look at Vaughan who was seated next to him.

"Why is Agbonlahor the one starting?!" All the reporters had the same question when they saw the starting lineup.

“Based on current form, James Vaughan should be Rooney’s starting partner. If not for his brace in the semi-final, Spain might be the one playing in the final!”

“I don’t know why Tony made such an arrangement...”

“Sigh, what’s there to not understand? Just look at Lippi. All these successful managers do the same thing when it comes to important matches—They would rather pick players that they are more familiar and like more, instead of players who are performing better. It’s just experience. Agbonlahor is a Nottingham Forest player and he worships Twain. Twain likes him a lot too. Compared to Vaughan, Twain is more familiar with him, that’s why he starts.”

The reporters were embroiled in a discussion and for a moment, “nepotism” was the trending thought amongst the reporters.

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After reading out the starting lineup, Twain looked at the players and remembered the expressions on everyone’s faces.

“This is the starting lineup.”

The match tactics had been discussed during the tactical meeting the day before and even though everyone did not know who would be starting at that time, they had to remember the tactics for their own positions.

“I hope that everyone still remembers what we discussed last night. Let’s give them a surprise!”

This starting lineup was too much of a blow to everyone, so much so that they did not hear what Twain said after that. They were all concerned about Vaughan.

Twain had to bring their attention back to the match. He clapped and raised his voice, “What’s wrong? Pre-match anxiety causing you guys to be distracted?”

The players could tell very easily that their Boss was a little unhappy. So, despite their unhappiness about Vaughan’s treatment, they had to keep it to themselves and focus their attention back onto the match.

However, due to the starting lineup issue, they had forgotten about their nervousness. They were only a little bit confused. How could Boss make such an obvious mistake when he had always been treating everyone in the team very fairly? They did not feel that Agbonlahor should not be starting, but even an idiot could tell that Vaughan was in better form and him starting would be much more effective than Agbonlahor. Did he not want to win this match? Could he really be doing this so that his favored players could make a name for themselves in history? Then why did he not let Moke, Cohen and Bentley start too? They were also players of Nottingham Forest, were they not?

The players headed to the pitch of the final with all these questions in their minds.

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“They’re out! Let’s welcome the eleven starting players for England!” John Morrison shouted passionately as he started to introduce every starting player for the fans.

Even though he was surprised about Agbonlahor starting the match, his voice and tone did not appear to be any different when he read out Agbonlahor's name.

To be honest, Twain's starting lineup was basically just as Lippi expected. He was only surprised that Twain did not start the impressive James Vaughan in the striker role and allowed Agbonlahor to start instead. This was a change that he did not understand. As a striker, Agbonlahor's shooting was not comparable to Vaughan. Other than his speed, he had no other advantage and he was more suitable on the flanks than in the middle. Italy had specially analyzed Vaughan for this match but they did not expect Twain to not start him!

Even though he was surprised, Lippi also felt very interested about it. He thought that the match would be very interesting since he was able to be surprised. As the last match before he retired, he was not just looking for a result, it would be best if it would be a match that he would never forget.

Tony Twain and his England team. They were obviously good enough to be the opponent for his final hurrah.

An explosive final, then we'll become champions.

This was Lippi's final wish.

Chapter 968: Like a Sleepwalker

After the game began, both teams did not devote full strength in the game but rather poked about respectively according to usual practice,.

Although England and Italy played against each other in the World Cup semifinals six years ago, the England team of that time was completely different from the current England team, and that Italian team was not the current one too. Especially for the team that Twain led, it required them to feel it out properly. How else would they know what kind of trap he had waiting for them?

After five minutes of trying out, Italy began to adopt a steady defensive counterattack stance. They were not in a hurry to attack, but first solidified their defense and stationed players in the midfield and backfield. This did not come as a surprise to everyone. Lippi had led the Italian team thrice and his most favored tactics had long been figured out by everyone. He himself was also aware of it. In this regard, it was more difficult to be surprising. It was better to play a tactic to the extreme.

It was not that he had not tried to make the Italian play better and more actively. For example, he had used the attacking style of 4-3-3, which resulted in being humiliated by Brazil with three goals in the FIFA Confederations Cup. That game also caused him to completely break off the idea of playing beautiful football. He thought it was more secure and easier to obtain victories by playing defensive football.

From this point of view, he and Twain fell in the same category.

Everyone obviously saw it this way, so they also thought that in the final, Twain would not choose conservative tactics without hesitation, and strive to not make mistakes or at least make fewer mistakes, in order not to concede the goal as a prerequisite to fight for victory in the game.

In that case, the final would be a dreary showdown between extremely conservative players. The competition between the two teams would not be which one was more capable of breaking each other's goals, but rather which team would make fewer mistakes. The outcome of a game played to a full 120 minutes would not come as a surprise. The probability of finally using a penalty shootout to determine the champion and runner-up was more than 50 percent ... In short, it was best for everyone to prepare for a protracted game. Those football fans from non-European areas staying up late to watch the game would be unlucky. They would have to wake up late in the night, yawning and feeling drowsy as they looked forward to a thrilling match. However, they did not expect to watch a game that would make them drowsier. How many people would stare at a pair of "panda eyes" during the day and curse the two conservative managers?

Twain looked at his watch in the technical area and it was already five minutes into the game. The probing phase was basically over. It was time to carry out his tactics.

So, he got up from his seat and walked slowly to the sidelines. He did not make any hand gestures. He did not whistle nor shout the name of a certain player. The England players on the pitch knew what to do when they saw him on the sidelines.

Everyone remembered what Twain said to them at the tactical meeting the day before the game. But even if the boss did not say it, they could guess what tactics the team would use in the game, because the training sessions for the last three days had been revealing that kind of information.

During last night's tactical meeting, Twain told his players not to play too conservatively in the first half. They had to attack aggressively and try to score a goal first so that the game would turn advantageous to themselves. If they could not score in the first half, it still would not be too late to play conservatively in the second half.

"... They're going to think we will adopt more conservative tactics to deal with them. If they think so, we'll seize the decisive opportunity to exploit this point to catch them off guard!"

As the Italians wanted to withdraw their defensive line and not give the England team too many chances to get near the goal, their control of the midfield was slightly weaker. It was easier for George Wood to take the ball further in the back, and no one came up to tackle and interfere.

After his teammates passed the ball to him, England's offensive relied on him.

As England's metronome, he controlled the rhythm of the team's attack. It was up to him to determine when it was time to speed up or slow down. If he controlled the wrong pace, not only would he not bring a goal to the team, he would put the team in a dangerous situation. It was up to the metronome how well a team played.

After Wood got the ball, he had initially wanted to send a long pass to Rooney in front. He had seen the empty spot before he took the ball. But when the football was passed over, things changed again on the pitch. The previously glimpsed gap was filled in by the Italian defenders. Rooney had also been noticed by Criscito. If the ball had been passed as planned, the ball would most likely have fallen into the hands of the Italians and allowed them to fight back. This was not the result that Wood wanted.

He made a feint to attack and left the football in place. Then he looked around and found that his teammates were some distance away from him. This would not do... He made a hand signal for them to come up and receive.

Gerrard saw Wood in the front and ran back to support. The Italian midfielder, Aquilani also followed him as well.

Wood saw Aquilani following behind Gerrard and did not really want to pass the ball over. Instead, he suddenly dribbled the ball forward!

He and Gerrard passed each other by. Aquilani was so astounded that he threw Gerrard aside to pounce toward Wood while Wood had waited for him to make a move like this. He watched as Aquilani left Gerrard's side before he used the outer instep of his foot to knock the football to Gerrard, obliquely at the back while he lured Aquilani away.

Once Gerrard picked up the ball, he turned around and moved forward. When Lanzafame rushed toward him, he did not keep the ball, but passed the ball to Downing on the sideline where Lanzafame was.

It was what Twain had specifically asked for. He wanted the team to hold the ball as little as possible when it was going through the midfield and to maneuver the opponent's defensive line through quick passes. This approach was particularly important in dealing with a defensively tight team like Italy, as it was difficult to find a breakthrough point in a catenaccio style defense solely based on individual skills. Only quick passes could rip it apart.

Downing had just received the ball and Joe Mattock, who was behind him, suddenly charged past the center line.

The scene stunned the commentators in the press box – a full back's assists were quite “symbolic” in a football game. It suggested that the team's tactical thinking was not conservative, but an aggressive pursuit of attacking opportunities. Otherwise the manager would not have let the full back plug in so boldly to assist. In today's game, for example, the Italian team's two full backs had not crossed the center line once.

“Joe Mattock suddenly plugs in and participates in the attack! Can this be a signal that they are going to be more active?”

Lippi's eyebrows were raised. He had also noticed it. It was clear that Downing did not go along the sideline to break through after receiving the ball. Instead, he suddenly cut inside as if he wanted to go in the middle. Italy's De Rossi soon came up to block his way, but it appeared that his real purpose was not here...

Sure enough, in the next second, Lippi saw Mattock overtake at a high speed from behind Downing. His move also caught the attention of De Rossi and the Italian right back, Santon – an assist from the full back? Although it was an old trick from the book, it was still very useful and could be described as a classic routine.

Now Santon was trapped in an impossible situation. Previously, Rooney had pulled to the side and Criscito did not follow, out of consideration for the stability of the overall defense. Instead, he let Santon

guard the other party. Now there was also Joe Mattock on this side and there were three players within the small area, which suddenly kept him a little busy. In fact, Santon's qualities were in offense. He was fast, nimble, powerful break out ability and was excellent in crosses from the byline. He was average in defense. He mainly relied on his overall strength. It was unrealistic to let him face three players alone now. De Rossi noticed it, too, and he decided to help Santon.

These things were just flashes of thoughts.

Just as Mattock was plugging in from behind Downing, who acted like he was going to pass. But he suddenly zipped into the penalty area at a diagonal line!

De Rossi, who had changed his focus, did not expect Downing to break through so determinedly. He watched helplessly as his opponent broke through in front of his side and had no way of stopping it at all.

Before he broke through, Agbonlahor had pulled out and positioned at the penalty area line to receive. While the Italian defense also tacitly pressed forward and maintained along the same line as him. They knew that this man was fast and an effective way to deal with a speedy striker was to make him fall into the trap of being in an offside position.

Downing saw Agbonlahor being marked by Chiellini and passed the football over.

The Italian defenders' personal skill level was quite high, especially for someone who was the team captain. Chiellini's defense was impenetrable. Agbonlahor felt that he could not guarantee that he could turn around while dribbling the football. Perhaps it could only be intercepted. Fortunately, he saw Downing continue to plug in after he passed the ball and he knew what to do.

He immediately passed the football over!

"A beautifully executed one-two combination!" Motson cried.

But he called it a little too early.

Criscito, Juventus' main full back, apparently had anticipated that England would play such a combination. He locked in his position early and shoveled the ball out before Downing!

"Ah ha! A brilliant defense!" This time it was the Italian commentator's turn to cheer.

However, he called it too soon as well...

The football that was shoveled out by Criscito did not fall at the feet of the other Italian players such as Aquilani, but it was picked up by George Wood...

Wood did not stop the ball and then seek to continue the attack. Instead, while the Italian defense had not yet reacted, he directly kicked a powerful shot when the ball came!

"George—Wood!!!"

The football flew out after a brush with the goalpost, hitting the billboard behind it and emitted a muffled noise. It was as if it had hit the Italians in the heart, startling them.

The goalkeeper, Amelia tried his hardest to pounce over, but it was not enough to get to the ball. Wood's shot was very fast, and he was too late. If the ball had been shot within the frame of the goalpost, then it would be hard to say what the outcome would be...

Despite not scoring, Twain still stood on the sidelines to applaud England's attack just now.

He had not forgotten to glance at Lippi next door. The other man was sitting in a chair. But looking at him, it was as if he had been meaning to get up. Apparently Lippi could not sit still.

This is my gift to you for our first meeting. I hope you like it, wily old fox.

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For the rest of the game, England had no intention of relenting, but it became more and more aggressive. Not only did Joe Mattock plug in frequently, even the defensively strong right back, Richards also tried to come up and coordinate with Walcott.

Wood was in charge of dispatching and diverting the ball in the middle while Gerrard was more of a shadow striker, threatening the goal guarded by Amelia with his long shots.

Rooney also used his strong body several times to look for opportunities in front of the goal and grab points of landing to shoot.

Only Agbonlahor's performance was mediocre. On the one hand, he was marked by Chiellini. On the other hand, his special feature was speedy attacks, rather than a target-man type of center forward. The Italian team withdrew its defense and compressed the space in front of the goal, leaving him little room to play ...

Seeing his performance, the commentators expressed their views one by one on why Twain did not let Vaughan start, and brought on Agbonlahor whose performance was mediocre and consistently sluggish. Was it because he was a Nottingham Forest player?

"If the England team ends up losing the final, I think this starting lineup position has to bear a lot of responsibility. Tony Twain has pushed himself and Agbonlahor into the fire pit."

"Agbonlahor's performance has made the England team play on the pitch as if there were only ten men fighting!"

"One of his best performances so far was just to coordinate a wall pass with Downing and kicked a pass. Tsk tsk, it's really an 'excellent' performance..."

Commentators from all over the world displayed their linguistic talents as they mocked Agbonlahor's performance.

In fact, Agbonlahor was really under great pressure. Although he was keen to play in the final, he did not expect to receive a chance in this way – James Vaughn was more qualified than he was but could only sit on the substitutes' bench. Was he really here on the basis that he was a "Nottingham Forest player?" It made him feel like a thief, stealing the starting lineup qualification from Vaughn.

There was always this idea in his head. How could he play well?

Maybe Twain had made a mistake in letting him start.

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While Agbonlahor was playing like a sleepwalker over there, James Vaughn sat here on the substitutes' bench, staring at Twain's back with flames shooting out of his eyes. He had already planned in his mind that if they failed in the final, he would bombard this obstinate and self-opinionated man in front of the media.

He simply felt so aggrieved. Previously, he did not get any decent opportunities in the tournament. During his unexpected debut in the semifinal, he tried hard to save a desperate crisis by scoring two goals on his own. He had wanted to continue to be in the starting lineup with such a fine performance and make his mark in the history of English football. Unexpectedly, the manager's completely unreliable adjustment continued to put him out on the cold. However warm his buttocks were, it would not warm the bench.

However, much he searched his brains, he could not figure out why Twain had made such a decision. Now as he watched Agbonlahor's poor performance on the pitch, he did not know whether he should be worried about the England team or show a little thrill for the success of revenge.

Twain did not have the energy to think about what Vaughn thought of being cold shouldered by him. He was taking advantage of a dead-ball opportunity on the field, shouting Agbonlahor's name.

"You better f**king act like a professional player! Do you want me to bring you off?! This is the final! The final of the UEFA European Championship! Do you know how many people want to be in your position, a**hole!"

Agbonlahor's performance somewhat startled Twain, infuriating him. His sleepwalking performance was entirely ruining his own arrangements. If he did not play properly, England's offense would be hampered in the first half. Then he would probably be forced to use defense to fight against Italy in the second half and drag the game to a penalty shootout.

Twain's words roused Agbonlahor. He suddenly understood his situation – Indeed, how could he think about whether he should be standing here in a game like this? The important thing was that he was already standing here, so he should consider his mission here.

All right.

He took a deep breath and tried to calm his emotions again.

Even if I have stolen the right to be in the starting lineup, so what? Am I not part of the England team? Am I not eligible to make my appearance in the starting lineup? Don't tell me that I can't score a goal?

If you all think I'm just playing an insignificant role and that only James Vaughan can save the team, that's good. I'd love to show you where you're wrong.

Chapter 969: Qualified to Be in The Starting Lineup

No one knew what was going on in Agbonlahor's mind at this moment. Even he himself did not know how the idea rose from the depths of his mind.

Anyway, he now had a feeling surging within his chest. He would not be satisfied with just going on and running a couple of laps in the UEFA European Championship final. The team's starting lineup had eleven players, but only a goalscorer could leave his name in the final. As a striker, he innately had more advantage than the other teammates in other positions. So, what was the purpose of fecklessly running for dozens of minutes?

Of course, he wanted to score goals!

He must score a goal!

Agbonlahor threw himself into the game again. It was clearly seen that he was more actively running and moving than he had been before, and that he no longer seemed to be stationed at the forefront. Instead, he had pulled out of the opponent's penalty area and took the initiative to raise his hand for the ball.

With regards to his change, Twain was very satisfied, so he also did not continue to supervise the game on the sidelines but went back to the technical area to drink water.

Everyone in the coaching unit was aware of why he wanted Agbonlahor to be in the starting lineup and give up on Vaughn. But they could not tell the players the reason why, because it was related to whether the team could win the game.

Three minutes later, England's sustained offensive finally created a chance for Agbonlahor. After receiving Wood's pass on the edge of the penalty area, he broke through to the penalty area to face the goalkeeper, Amelia. He attempted to get around the other person using his outer instep of his foot. Unfortunately, the arc was slightly too wide, and it went straight out of the far end of the goalpost.

The Englishmen felt a great pity for the shot while the Italians broke out in a cold sweat.

But the commentators who opposed Agbonlahor in the starting lineup were still picking on his faults as they said, "What a shame! If it had been Vaughn, maybe he would have gotten it in..."

The statement was completely irresponsible because James Vaughn's shooting was not so accurate down to the millimeters. Shooting required some luck. With some good luck, even a terrible shot could score a goal, and it might even be a world-class goal. If there was bad luck, even a striker with the level of Romário would also miss his shot with an empty goal. Moreover, in terms of having the experience of a major competition, Agbonlahor was clearly stronger than Vaughan, as Nottingham Forest was still able to play in important tournaments like the Champions League in previous years and Agbonlahor had also won. Twain put Agbonlahor in the starting lineup was not simply an act of cronyism. It was only because Agbonlahor did have the ability to be in the starting lineup in such an important game.

The main reason for the media's criticism was that Agbonlahor had only scored one goal in this UEFA European Championship which was really not compatible with his position as a striker. However, he did a fairly decent job in the right back position.

Agbonlahor's shot failed to score a goal but Twain stood on the sidelines to applaud his performance just now. There was no problem with the use of his technique. It was just a bit of bad luck...

Agbonlahor himself could not hear the commentators' remarks about himself. He was able to locate an area which he could make use of through this shot.

In the attack that followed, Agbonlahor was more likely to appear in the flanks of the Italian team's rear defensive line – the area between the center back and the full back was a position that made things difficult for the other team. It was sort of an unregulated area, which was tricky for everyone.

Wood also discovered this, and he had his own plans.

Generally speaking, Rooney should be the England team's main offensive point because he was physically strong, had excellent techniques and experienced. But these were just text and line diagrams on the tactical board. When it came to the actual game, it was not possible for Rooney to get that many chances. Mitchell was suspended and Vaughan, who excelled in the semifinals, was put on the bench by Twain. In the eyes of the Italians, the most threatening man in the England team's forward line was Rooney, and there was no reason why they should let him be.

As a result, in the actual games, Rooney suffered from the toughest defense.

Just looking at Criscito, one would know how risky it was to pass the ball to him...

Wood was a man, not a machine. With the instructions received before the game, he had the right to modify according to the situation on the pitch. Now that Rooney's path was not working, he had to change the way. He took aim at Agbonlahor, who had moved like a sleepwalker earlier.

He did not know why Twain did not let Vaughn play, but he did not think that Agbonlahor was incapable or unqualified to be in the starting lineup. Furthermore, in his view, Agbonlahor's previous sleepwalking performance was a big advantage. If it was well taken advantage of, it could produce an unexpected effect for the Italians.

Because his previous poor performance had already caused the Italian defenders to relax on the marking of him. Now the Italians must think in their hearts that Agbonlahor must not pose a threat to them, right?

That would be fantastic...

Wood ran to the front field to participate in the attack and Gerrard passed the ball back to him. Wood gave the football directly to Agbonlahor in the flanks. Sure enough, when he got the ball, the Italian defenders did not pounce over to him at the first instance.

Agbonlahor took advantage of the little time to quickly complete the turn of his body to face the goal.

When Chiellini pounced over, he was not engrossed in dribbling the ball inside, but suddenly diverted the football to the middle!

The Italians really did not expect the move. Gerrard in the middle received the pass and did not hesitate to swing his leg for a long shot!

Fortunately, Amelia was very focused, and Gerrard's long shot was firmly pressed under his body.

But this attack made the Italians aware of one thing – Agbonlahor was still the guy who passed the ball to someone else and he was definitely not England's main attacking direction.

This reinforced the Italian defenders' thinking to focus on Rooney and Gerrard.

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"Actually, in the first half our tactics were not suitable for Agbonlahor to play..." Walker said to Twain, standing on the sidelines. "He's better suited to counterattacks, and I think he should be more useful to bring on after we're ahead..."

"Most people think so too, including Italians." Twain turned his head to say to Walker as he shook his head. "Agbonlahor is too fast and dazzling. Everyone had formed a fixed idea of him. Including the current Nottingham Forest manager... But I don't think so. In all the years he has played for me, he'd have been out of the team if he only uses his speed to play. He has another side, which is just not very noticeable. I'm just trying to make use his unobtrusive side to help me open the situation."

At this point, Twain laughed and said, "Now the Italian players think so too."

He pointed to the field for Walker to see.

Agbonlahor's position was pulled back a little, but not one of the Italian defenders pulled out to follow and defend against him. The Italian midfielders players were all paying attention to Gerrard and Wood, who frequently plugged in from behind, as well as two other wingers.

Agbonlahor was raising his hand for the ball. He had not forgotten to look around to see the situation around him. Unsurprisingly, no one noticed him. He was taken lightly.

Agbonlahor was angry about such treatment, but Twain was laughing instead. And he laughed happily.

"Lippi..." He glanced next door and said, "is a very cautious manager, but he did not think I'd let Agbonlahor, who has performance averagely in this tournament, to be in the starting lineup, so he certainly did not make any targeted arrangements for Agbonlahor. It's all up to the players to judge. You know, Des. Everyone makes mistakes. They have their own ideas, and that's something the manager can't control..."

Under Lippi's repeated emphasis, the Italian players, gave the England team a high degree of attention. But Agbonlahor, who was outside of the plan, was not given the respect he deserved. Of course, his previous poor performance "helped" him. No one would waste time on a player who was not in good form. Compared to Agbonlahor, even George Wood's shots were more threatening.

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Wood did not plan to tell his teammates what he thought, and then for everyone to pass the ball to Agbonlahor. This was a gamble to bet that the Italians would not react so quickly. If the England team had fed Agbonlahor the ball, it would only expose the real intent. So, he decided to do it alone.

It was certainly a bit of a risk. But as the team's metronome and core, choosing when to take the risk and when to be conservative was basically within his remit.

Agbonlahor raised his hand again for the ball, and Wood passed the ball over. Then he charged forward and made a move to look like he was going to do "one-two combination" with Agbonlahor. The Italian

defenders did fall for the ploy. Whether it was Chiellini or Aquilani, they all turned their attention to him and ignored Agbonlahor, who had already gotten the ball.

Receiving the ball and turning at the same time, Agbonlahor did not intend to pass the ball. He looked up to see a straight path through to the penalty area ...

In the flank of the defensive line between Chiellini and De Vita, there was a crack, from which Agbonlahor could see the penalty area.

After Agbonlahor falsely appeared to look like he was going to pass the ball, he suddenly pushed the ball forward and then set in movement!

Chiellini was watching Wood, while De Vita was marking the "Tiger" Walcott. No one expected Agbonlahor to choose to dribble the ball on his own to see a breakthrough!

He was really fast. In a flash he already had rushed in, and that was when Chiellini began to turn around...

"Stop him!" De Rossi cried panicked a little.

Criscito charged in from the side. Once again, he made a crucial decision to drop Rooney and pounce toward Agbonlahor. It was all out of the instinct of a good defender.

Agbonlahor, who broke into the penalty area, also did not hold back and immediately lifted his leg to shoot at the goal. Just at the same moment, Criscito did a slide tackle and shoveled him out along with the ball!

"A penalty shot!" John Motson screamed.

"A beautiful defense!" It was the voice of the Italian commentator.

Agbonlahor, who fell to the ground, thought he could hear the whistle for the penalty shot, but there was nothing. The ball that was shoveled by Criscito was kicked out by Chiellini, who had rushed back. The referee gave no indication of Criscito's action, and Agbonlahor jumped angrily from the ground. He rushed toward the indifferent-looking assistant referee to complain, "It's a foul! It's a foul!"

Like him, there were other England players who were equally unhappy. Wood ran to the referee and pointed to the penalty area to remind him that Criscito's defense was absolutely a foul. Rooney was also upset for Agbonlahor even though he made a gesture to get Agbonlahor to pass the ball to him when Criscito headed for Agbonlahor.

The referee simply waved his hands at Wood's protest, signaling that he was clear about it and he did not have to say more.

Twain was also angry off the field, but the man who endured his rants and spats was the fourth official.

"Please believe the referee's decision. Not every fall to the ground is a foul..." In the face of the manager, who was described by the media as a demon, the fourth official showed a lack of confidence when he said these words.

“This is why I support the use of electronic eyes instead of referees! Humans make mistakes!” Twain threw out the remark and walked back in anger. He knew that he would not get the penalty shot no matter how much noise he made. The referee’s decision was not allowed to be changed. Looking for the fourth official was just to vent his feeling of dissatisfaction. It was not good for the health of his heart to bottle those feelings ...

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England still did not get the penalty spot and the Italians had a narrow escape. They began to pay attention to Agbonlahor and closely mark him. They no longer gave him the space to move freely. Any fool could see that the sleepwalker was gradually waking up. Not to mention Lippi’s displeasure with the Italian team’s defensive performance on the pitch just now. He reminded them to stand guard against Agbonlahor.

They still thought Agbonlahor was not a threat as long as they did not give him the space to sprint with the ball.

Twain started calling Walcott’s name off the pitch and Walcott, who had returned from the recovery of his injury in the first half, was not active enough in his performance.

“Take more balls, what are you afraid of? Do more crosses... from the byline!”

“George! Go over and coordinate more with him... Yes, yes, that’s it!”

Walcott and Wood ran forward after a one-two combination on the sideline. Then Wood gave him a pass over the head to bypass De Vita’s defense.

Once he received Wood’s pass, Walcott crossed the ball from the byline. Rooney grabbed the point of all in the middle, but he was clearly unable to contend against Italy’s entire rear defensive line. The football was headed out by Chiellini.

Despite the lack of success in the attack, Twain still applauded the players’ performance off the field.

The England fans were also clapping. Because the strong attacking stance that the England team displayed had completely suppressed the Italian team.

The Italian commentator did not think so and remarked, “I think the situation is currently in our favor. The more the English players attack, the better our chances of winning. When Lippi decided to use defensive counterattack before, I was still worried that the England team wouldn’t come attacking and in that way, we couldn’t win the game. Now, it’s all good. There is one side willing to play along first and I think the game will be over within 90 minutes ...”

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After Walcott and Downing increased the passes from the sides, Agbonlahor seemed to be forgotten again. He did not have excellent header skills and did not have the upper hand in jumping to compete for headers. But Rooney frequently appeared in front of the goal and compete against the Italian defenders.

But Agbonlahor himself did not give up. He was still looking for a chance to score a goal, like a hunter waiting patiently for the rabbit to appear in front of him.

When Walcott dribbled the ball to break through again, the Italian defenders split into two groups. One group was to prevent him from breaking through and the other to keep a close eye on Rooney and Gerrard.

This time Walcott did not simply overtake by relying on speed and then cross from the byline. He made a feint to cross, tricking De Vita to shift his center of gravity. Instead, he suddenly slammed the ball between De Vita's legs and then made use of his nimble figure to get past De Vita.

"A beautiful way to knock the ball past the opponent."

Walcott, who broke through De Vita, made Italy's defensive line extremely nervous because cracks had already appeared in their defensive line. Walcott could either continue to break through on his own, or he could cross the ball now. He could even directly strike the goal.

Chiellini rushed toward Walcott. While Rooney was very important, it was always important to remember during defense that the player who had the ball was the most dangerous.

Walcott passed the ball while he was rushing up. He did not pass to Rooney nor to Gerrard, but to Agbonlahor who was hanging near the penalty spot.

Agbonlahor was not unmarked. Aquilani was next to him. Seeing him receive the ball, he came forward to interfere.

Agbonlahor lifted his leg to act as if he was going to shoot at the goal, so Aquilani simply threw his center of gravity.

It was almost instinctive. Agbonlahor basically did not have the frame of mind to think about why he would receive the ball as well as what he should do next. Seeing that he had thrown Aquilani off balance, he simply knocked the ball to the left and ducked to the other side. It just looked like there was more than one trouble...

Having just evaded Aquilani, De Rossi appeared in front of Agbonlahor again, blocking the angle of his shot.

Agbonlahor once again picked up his feet to act as if he was going to shoot. This time De Rossi was not fooled. He stood in place and did not move ...

"He should have passed the ball! Rooney's asking for the ball!"

His hesitation will lead to the failure of this attack. He already has no angle and space to shoot..."

"Our defense is very successful. Agbonlahor now has to either send the ball out or wait for the ball to be intercepted!"

De Rossi thought Agbonlahor must have made a feint this time, but he did not expect when Agbonlahor's right foot came down, he really hit the football ...

It was a very covert shot. Agbonlahor used the tip of his toes to poke the football under the circumstances of being unable to use force to kick in place. In order to exert as much force as possible, his body had to lean back to help with the push.

The football, which was poked by the toe tips, flew straight between De Rossi's legs towards the goal.

De Rossi's position blocked the angle of Agbonlahor's shot, but he was unable to narrow the gap between his legs. Instead it blocked the goalkeeper, Amelia's line of sight. When Amelia saw the football flying towards the goal post, he was already too late to make any save. He could only turn his head to look as the football flew toward the goal while he prayed in his heart that it would not enter the goal at the same time. It was best that it would just brush against the goalpost to fly out...

Unfortunately, the Italian's prayer were not heard by God. The football brushed against the goalpost to fly into the goal!

"What?" The Italians had not reacted yet. Looking at it from the stands, it appeared as if the football brushed against the goalpost to fly out of the goal and swept the side of the net, giving people the illusion that the ball went in. But when they saw the referee's gesture, they were stunned – the referee's finger pointed to the center circle, which effectively meant that it was a goal!

"It's truly unbelievable! England has taken the lead!"

"Agbonlahor! That's right! He scored the first goal in the final! He has helped England to take the lead!"

"When blocked by two Italian players, Agbonlahor calmly shot straight! Beautiful!"

At this moment, the commentators totally changed their tone and switched to praising Agbonlahor's performance. No one mentioned the matter of whether he was qualified to replace Vaughn to be in the starting lineup anymore ...

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Off the field, after Twain saw Agbonlahor kick the ball into the goal, he jumped up excitedly and hugged Walker next to him.

Agbonlahor's goal took away a heavy load off himself and Twain. Even if Agbonlahor was brought off later in the game... Or, more extremely, even if England eventually lost the final, no one would question Twain's adjustment anymore.

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Agbonlahor was so excited after he scored the goal. He could not stand properly when he got up from the ground. He almost fell to the ground again. After running staggeringly to the technical area, he gave Twain an enthusiastic embrace. He had to thank the boss. If he had not insisted on sending him on the pitch, and if he had not roared to wake him up off the field, then the UEFA European Championship final would perhaps have been a permanent regret for him in his professional career.

Now it had all worked out. He scored the goal, and there was no regret. He was a striker who had scored in the UEFA European Championship final. He could already face others' scrutiny with his head held high and chest puffed out.

He had used his actions to prove that he was qualified and had the ability to represent England in the UEFA European Championship final. Whatever Vaughn had thought, Agbonlahor was a well-deserved starting striker at this time!

“Well done, kid!” Twain patted Agbonlahor on the back and shouted in his ear.

Chapter 970: That Old Fox

“Agbonlahor! YES! YES! YES! Agbonlahor!”

The England fans in the stands leaped from their seats, raising their arms high to cheer on their goalscoring hero. It as if there was an earthquake at the Bernabéu stadium. Even the camera lenses were trembling.

Amid the earthshattering cheers, Agbonlahor broke free of his teammates’ tugs and hugs to run all the way to the technical area, where he gave Twain a strong hug. Everyone was aware that for him to be able to appear in the finals, it had a lot to do with Twain. And his goal was the best way to repay the trust of the boss.

“Ah ha! Twain’s unexpected adjustment has left the Italians completely unable to respond! In the 24th minute, we are in the lead with one goal! Well done, Agbonlahor! Well done, Twain!” John Motson did not question Twain’s substitution in his previous commentary, so at this point he was fully confident when he made these remarks at this time.

After he finished hugging Twain, Agbonlahor found Mitchell in the crowd and rushed up to embrace him.

“This goal is for you, Aaron!” An excited Agbonlahor roared in Mitchell’s ear.

Mitchell was a little surprised, but he was soon caught up in the mood of the players around him. He leaned down to tightly hug his teammate who was 21 cm shorter than himself. They were teammates twice over, both in the national team and the club team. He felt that perhaps due to this relationship, Agbonlahor would take the initiative to hug him after the goal.

“Well done, The Flash! Score another goal!” Mitchell affectionately called him by the nickname he gave to Agbonlahor.

Twain was very satisfied to see the scene at the side. The atmosphere in the locker room was very harmonious. This team was united. With such a team, he was not afraid of any opponent.

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The English people cheered for their lead, while the Italians were collectively silent.

Lippi did not get angry on the sidelines for the goal concede. In fact, whatever the situation was, it was hard to see him show his emotions on the sidelines. Now he was just sitting in the technical area. His eyes hidden behind the gold-rimmed glasses, were staring at the field. He was thinking about the mistakes they had made before.

He did not think Twain would let Agbonlahor be in the starting lineup. It was really unexpected. As a result, he did not make any targeted arrangements for Agbonlahor in the pre-match preparations. This led directly to his players not knowing what to do with Agbonlahor on the pitch. If England's number 18 had played a little more actively, it would have been a good thing for the Italian players would know from experience that he was an important figure and naturally shifted their defensive focus to him. However, as it happened, Agbonlahor's previous performance was like a sleepwalk, so that everyone, including himself, had lowered his status by several levels in their minds. They thought there was no threat to this kind of performance...

Now it seemed that Twain was indeed a master of psychological control and very good at analyzing the psychology of other people. He had figured out what he thought...

Lippi admitted that he made an empiricist error and took it for granted when it came to studying Twain's starting lineup – James Vaughan was outstanding in the semifinals and there was no news of any injury during training these few days, so he thought he would definitely be in the starting lineup for the final game. He did not expect Twain to stubbornly stood up to the enormous pressure and put Vaughn on the bench.

This opponent was interesting.

He got up from his seat and walked to the sidelines, making hand signals to the players on the field.

He wanted Chiellini to step up his defense against Agbonlahor and not give him that kind of chance easily. He believed that with the ability of the Italian defenders, as long as they attached importance to Agbonlahor, the other party should have little room to play.

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Lippi's adjustment was well within Twain's anticipation because if he was still unmoved after seeing Agbonlahor play actively and score the goal, then Lippi must have been brain-swapped by the aliens and was not normal.

He was not worried that Agbonlahor would be closely marked. Now that they were ahead of Italy, it did not matter even if Agbonlahor was subsequently rendered ineffective from the marking. The important thing was to hold on to the one-goal advantage and then use that advantage to lure the Italians out to make their tight defense non-existent.

He just asked the team to pay attention to the defense for a while to come.

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Lippi did not intend to rush to equalize the score in the first half. Although the players were certain to be eager to fight back after the goal concede, it was only a matter of time before they returned.

The reason he was in no hurry to equalize the score was that a one-goal lead would be a huge psychological burden for the England team. Like running a marathon, it was an unwise move to be a leader from the start. No coach would let his own athletes develop such tactics. The person with real strength to win the title must be hiding in the second group, maintaining the pressure on the leader at any time and overtaking at the last moment.

Lippi's current thinking was the same as those of the long-distance running coaches. He had thrown the intense mental pressure of being in the lead upon his opponent. Because it was not a regular game. It was the finals, the final game of the UEFA European Championship. As time went on, a one-goal lead would become a huge psychological burden for the England players. Everyone would think in their minds – we must absolutely never concede the goal. Otherwise our championship will be gone...

This thinking would become heavier and heavier as time went on until England completely collapsed.

Lippi decided to make adjustments during the halftime interval and step up in the second half. By then, as long as the score was equalized, the huge psychological advantage would tip to the Italian side, and a fundamental reversal would happen to the situation on the pitch. At that time, there would be little time left in the game. Their morale would be boosted, while the England team would suffer a major blow. Ultimately, the victory must belong to the Italian team.

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The Italian team organized a few attacks after the game resumed, wanting to equalize the score. But in the face of England's tight defense readied in advance, they did not manage to gain any traction, so they simply retreated.

Twain was happy at first – the Italians finally pressed out. However, after a brief moment of delight, it did not take long for him to find a problem.

The Italians did not panic about conceding a goal in the final and stormed up to surround and bombard England's penalty area – even though that was what Twain wanted to see. After a few attacks without any results, they immediately retracted and returned to their previous defensive counterattack stance as if they were the leading team.

It obviously had to do with the white-haired old man who directed the game on the sidelines.

Twain bowed his head in deep contemplation for a while and he guessed Lippi's idea.

Just like what he had often said to his players, "A one-goal lead is the least secured score in the world," it was not of his original creation, but just a generalization of what he had surmised. All the football managers in the world were aware of this kind of reasoning. Even if they were proponents of 1:0, they often had to mentally suffer the pressure from being bombarded by the other side surrounding the goal in the game and fearing that they might be equalized at any time.

Lippi must have thought so, intending to pass the psychological pressure on to the leading England team.

From this point of view, it was not a good thing to be in the lead too early...

In a long marathon race, the Englishmen took the lead in storming out the majority of their forces. While the seasoned Italians, on the other hand, were mostly hidden among their forces, keeping an appropriate distance away from the leading England team. In the beginning, it was a battle of skill and strength. But towards the end, things like skills and strength were no longer important. Mentality would eventually determine the champion.

Since that was the case, then he would let the team continue to strengthen the offensive and make the one-goal lead into a two-goal lead!

Twain walked to the sidelines and looked at the field. It was at this moment he remembered: England's forward line had been largely frozen after Lippi asked Chiellini to step up his defense against Agbonlahor. Even if he wanted to step up the offensive, how should he do it?

Twain scolded in his heart, "That old fox!"

Agbonlahor was not, after all, a true center forward. Once he was closely marked by the opposing defender in the penalty area, the function of his role was actually quite small. At this point Twain would especially miss Mitchell. At least his headers would help the team tear up the Italian defense.

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With the two managers were fighting a battle of wits on the sly, the remaining time in the first half of the game was no different from before the goal was scored. The England team attacked ferociously and wanted to score another goal before the end of the first half, while the Italians solidified their defensive build-up and were determined not to let the Englishmen get what they wanted.

Right up till the last minute, Twain did not see his team breach the goal for the second time.

The England team entered the locker room with a one-goal lead. The Italians, who was behind by a goal, was not so frustrated. Lippi's face was calm as he walked back down the tunnel, making it difficult to guess whether he was satisfied or dissatisfied with the situation.

The commentators from various countries had expressed optimism about the England team one by one.

"The England team is one goal ahead! In such a final, the side which first scores a goal must have the advantage. And more advantageously, they have maintained this lead until the halftime interval!"

"England's tactics were so successful that the Italians did not expect Agbonlahor to become the England team's goalscorer. They had neglected to mark him. Despite their subsequent tight watch on England's number 18, the reality remains that they are a goal behind..."

"The first half was fantastic! It did not turn out to be as dreary as I had expected before. England's aggressive attitude has earned my respect. Their efforts also deservedly paid off – one goal to take the lead! The champion belongs to the aggressive side, belongs to the offensive football!"

Even the England fans were pleased with the result.

In the stands, Skinny Bill was extremely thrilled about the first half and shouted, "That's fantastic! We're actually ahead!"

"Hey, Bill, what do you mean by that? Don't tell me we shouldn't have been ahead?" Someone next to him feigned anger.

"Nonsense, of course, we should be in the lead! I just did not expect it to go so well! As long as we maintain this result, we can win the championship title! Tony is the best at defense. Under such circumstances, he can definitely win the game! It's only an hour before we win the UEFA European

Championship for the first time in our history... Just thinking about it makes me excited!" Bill was not lying. He was slightly shaking.

"Tony really had the good idea of letting Agbonlahor start. Not even I, a Forest fan, could anticipate it. I think Lippi and the others must not have thought so. Otherwise, why was there no one to specifically defend against Agbonlahor?"

"That's right! Before the game everyone was talking about Vaughn, Vaughn... I'm sick of hearing it. The best result will be that England wins the UEFA European Championship and our Nottingham Forest players scores the only goal, ha ha!"

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The fans and commentators were extremely optimistic, but Twain was not bullish at all. As he walked into the locker room, every England player could see the creases in between his eyebrows. It was clear that their boss was not happy with the one-goal lead, but rather worried about something.

The players always thought less than the manager because they were the players and they were only responsible for implementing the manager's tactical intent on the pitch. To put it in a not-so-nice way, they were tools while the manager was the captain steering the team. He must think more than any other clever player and look further afield. Or his ship would hit a submerged reef unknowingly, stranded if it was not so serious or worse, sank.

At the moment, none of the players could think of the crisis they would face next. Maybe it would not happen, but Twain had thought of it. He would have to consider it regardless of whether it happened or not. His task was to try to prevent bad things from happening.

"We're one goal ahead and that's very good, guys. It is reasonable to say that I should praise you at this time and congratulate you. But I'm sorry that I can't do it at the moment." Twain shook his head and said, "I've thought about the crisis we may face in the second half and I want you to know that a one-goal lead is definitely not a good thing."

The players thought their manager would say, "A one-goal lead is the least secured score in the world" but it was not the case.

Twain just said, "The Italian team is used to gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck. Think of the 2006 World Cup final in Germany, how did Italy equalize the score under the circumstances of trailing behind by one goal and dragging the game into a penalty shootout to eventually defeating France to pick up the gold trophy? We can learn from the previous mistakes of the French team and we cannot be satisfied with the score. In the second half if it's possible, I would like you to try to seize opportunities to score..."

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"You've done a good job, gentlemen." Lippi was in the locker room, speaking to his players. He was not in a hurry. The tone and manners of his speech were still elegant. "I'm not mocking you. I'm actually glad that you only concede one goal to England in the first half. Now it's time to think about our counterattack."

“In the first half we gave England the chance to take the ball at will in our midfield and that will no longer be the case in the second half. We need to regain control of the midfield.” He glanced at De Rossi and Aquilani. These two men would be the key.

“Their two sides pressed forward quite tightly. We will take advantage of that in the second half. Paloschi, you have to run more toward the sidelines in the second half to get more chances in this way. Foti, you continue to stay in the middle. We need you to make the transition in the middle to provide support and push their rear defensive line toward inside to create space for our midfield.”

The two forwards nodded. They were barely seen in the first half, and some people even suspected they had not played. For them, the 45 minutes of the first half were a real torment. They desperately needed to do something in the second half. It was the final of the UEFA European Championship and no one wanted to do nothing in such a game. Just looking at Agbonlahor, the kid was like a sleepwalking man before, but once he scored the goal, he became a hero.

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“In the second half, we will stop the strong offensive and change to a steady counterattack.”

No one was surprised when Twain said it. Because it was what they knew the day before the game. According to their plan, it was to try to score a goal to take the lead in the first half, and then gradually shrink the defense in the second half to start to play defensive counterattack. It was either to retain this one-goal advantage or taking the opportunity to launch a sneak attack to widen the score when the other side pressed on with the attack while eager to equalize the score.

It was the England team counting its chickens before they were hatched. It was difficult to say if it would be successful.

“We have to be quick during the counterattack...” Twain looked at Agbonlahor when he said this. He would continue to play in the second half rather than be replaced immediately. Because he had amazing speed, which was a very important weapon in the counterattack.

“Gabriel.” Twain called his name and said, “In the second half you don’t have to be at the fore front anymore. You have to actively retreat and pick up the ball in the midfield. We also have to pass the ball in front of us during our passes, giving Agbonlahor and Rooney space to run. But if the counterattack is blocked, you must immediately stop and put the ball under your feet. Do not easily waste the opportunity to attack.”

Hearing Twain say so, Agbonlahor knew he would not be replaced too early while the other person would not feel good.

James Vaughan knew Agbonlahor would continue to be trusted. He looked down at his jersey. There was also a T-shirt inside that said, “We’re with you, Aaron.” It was what he specially prepared for Mitchell.

But now it looked like it might not come in handy. He was wondering if he should take it off in a while. After all, it was a little hot wearing two T-shirts.

Since he could not make an appearance, then why would he still wear the T-shirt with the written words?

